PRICE $8.99

THE NEW YORKER

JAN. 23, 2023

VISIT…

Talk to a therapist from the comfort of your own home.

We all need help sometimes. With BetterHelp, getting support is easy. Sign up online and get matched to a therapist that suits your needs.

200,000,000
therapy interactions facilitated

25,000
therapists on the platform

3,000,000
clients helped

Get started with 10% off your first month at

betterhelp.com/newyorker

THE NEW YORKER

JANUARY 23, 2023

4 GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

11 THE TALK OF THE TOWN
Benjamin Wallace-Wells on G.O.P. chaos in the House; a Citi Biker gang; painting pots with Wet Leg; the opposite of vandalism; billionaires in space.

LETTER FROM SOUTH CAROLINA

James Lasdun 16 The Swamp
Murder and corruption in the Murdaugh family.

SHOUTS & MURMURS

Cora Frazier 23 Life Is Too Short

ANNALS OF INNOVATION

Rachel Monroe 24 Build Better
Can 3-D printing help solve the housing crisis?

A REPORTER AT LARGE

Evan Osnos 30 Trust Issues
Confessions of a disgruntled wealth manager.

PROFILES

Calvin Tomkins 42 A Raucous Assault
The art of Tala Madani.

FICTION

Yiyun Li 50 "Wednesday's Child"

THE CRITICS

BOOKS

Rebecca Mead 58 *Prince Harry's memoir, "Spare."*
Merve Emre 62 *A crisis in literary criticism.*
Nikhil Krishnan 67 *Sexual dissidence in the Victorian era.*
71 Briefly Noted

ON TELEVISION

Inkoo Kang 72 *"The Last of Us."*

POEMS

Rick Barot 36 "The Lovers"
Ariel Francisco 54 "Baton Bleu"

COVER

Pascal Campion "Daybreak"

DRAWINGS *Anne Fizzard, Benjamin Schwartz, David Sipress, Karl Stevens, Suerynn Lee, Julia Leigh and Phillip Day, Tom Toro, Jeremy Nguyen, Maggie Larson, Elisabeth McNair, Ed Himelblau, Brooke Bourgeois, Ellis Rosen and Jerald Lewis, Sara Lautman* SPOTS *Francesco Ciccolella*

THE NEW YORKER
The Daily

Special alerts for our biggest stories
The latest news and commentary
Reasons to love your in-box again.
Film, TV, and books pieces by our culture critics
Crosswords, games, fiction, and cartoons

Enjoy the best of *The New Yorker* in the Daily newsletter, curated by our editors.

Sign up now at
newyorker.com/newsletter

Scan to sign up.

CONTRIBUTORS

James Lasdun (*"The Swamp," p. 16*) is the author of several books of fiction and nonfiction. His novel "Afternoon of a Faun" was published in 2019.

Calvin Tomkins (*"A Raucous Assault," p. 42*) writes about art and culture for the magazine. "The Lives of Artists," a six-volume collection of his profiles, was released in 2019.

Rebecca Mead (*Books, p. 58*), a staff writer since 1997, most recently published "Home/Land."

Nikhil Krishnan (*Books, p. 67*) is a fellow in philosophy at Robinson College, University of Cambridge.

Cora Frazier (*Shouts & Murmurs, p. 23*) has contributed humor pieces to *The New Yorker* since 2012. She teaches writing for the City University of New York.

Pascal Campion (*Cover*), an artist living in Los Angeles, works in the animation industry. In December, he published "The Art of Pascal Campion."

Rachel Monroe (*"Build Better," p. 24*), a contributing writer, is the author of "Savage Appetites."

Evan Osnos (*"Trust Issues," p. 30*) covers politics and foreign affairs for the magazine. His latest book is "Wildland."

Yiyun Li (*Fiction, p. 50*) received a 2022 PEN/Malamud Award. Her novel "The Book of Goose" was released in September.

Rick Barot (*Poem, p. 36*) has published four poetry collections, including "The Galleons." He directs the Rainier Writing Workshop, in Washington State.

Merve Emre (*Books, p. 62*) is at work on a new book, "Love and Other Useless Pursuits." She is a writer-in-residence at Wesleyan University.

Ariel Francisco (*Poem, p. 54*), the author of "Under Capitalism if Your Head Aches They Just Yank Off Your Head," is an assistant professor of poetry and Hispanic studies at Louisiana State University.

THIS WEEK ON NEWYORKER.COM

DISPATCH
Emily Witt reports on the January 8th assault on the National Congress of Brazil, and its aftermath.

CULTURE DESK
E. Tammy Kim on Oh U-Am, the self-taught painter whose allegorical work tells the history of Korea.

Download the New Yorker app for the latest news, commentary, criticism, and humor, plus this week's magazine and all issues back to 2008.

LEFT: SERGIO LIME / AFP / GETTY; RIGHT: JEONGMEE YOON

THE MAIL

UNMASKED

Emma Green's piece about the People's C.D.C. is a snarky account of a group of community-minded health-care advocates who believe that the C.D.C. and the White House have failed in their responsibility to protect people from COVID (Annals of Activism, December 28th, www.newyorker.com/green-on-peoples-cdc). The author's efforts to belittle ("ragtag coalition") or Red-bait ("*those* people") groups that are simply trying to sound the alarm are not helpful. A fair-minded article might have looked at the morbidity and mortality numbers, and tried to explain what we could have done differently, and why we have become willing to accept so much illness and death.
Susan M. Reverby
Boston, Mass.

TWO SIDES OF MAILER

David Denby makes a compelling case for a Norman Mailer revival (A Critic at Large, December 26th). Although Mailer is often remembered as a brawler who was wrongheaded in affairs of sexual politics, Denby is spot on when he says that Mailer's "letters to friends and even to strangers are generously supportive." I am one of those strangers. As a graduate student in 1968, I sent my master's thesis on "An American Dream" to Mailer. It is clear to me now that my analysis was overblown. Mailer didn't put it that way, though. Instead, he suggested that my argument was incorrect only if it insisted on conscious intent, saying that "obviously the unconscious picks up osmotically ideas the mind long forgot." As for my writing style, he kindly offered suggestions for paring back "occasional excesses." For some, Mailer might have been a man fleeing his identity as a "nice Jewish boy from Brooklyn," but, for me, he will always be a mensch.
Robert Waxler
Dartmouth, Mass.

Denby, in describing how Norman Mailer's huge ambition and success put him at odds with his background, preëmpts the genius-as-tortured-soul interpretations that will likely appear this year, the centenary of Mailer's birth. As Denby notes, the Library of America is publishing, alongside a reissue of "The Naked and the Dead," a selection of letters that Mailer wrote to Beatrice Toltz Silverman, his first wife, during the Second World War. Silverman's influence on Mailer's life and career has been largely neglected. The couple's correspondence has only recently become available to researchers, and its publication promises to shed light on the role of women in his life, and on the sexism in the work of a man who defined himself as a great American writer. Like Denby, I hope that celebrations of Mailer's hundredth birthday will investigate the complexities that drove him to excess.
Carol Sklenicka
Jenner, Calif.

PLAYING THE FOOL

I enjoyed Molly Ringwald's reminiscence of her time working with Jean-Luc Godard ("The King and I," December 19th). It triggered my memory of an appearance of his at U.C. Berkeley in the seventies. Throughout the evening, Godard was clownish, oblique, and amused by the audience's reactions to what he said (things like "Communist, Fascist, it's all the same," which did not go down well with the Berkeley crowd). Some audience members angrily denounced the films shown before his appearance, a double feature of "Ici et Ailleurs" and "Comment Ça Va." But Godard just sat there, taking in the spectacle. I was sorry to read that Ringwald and Victoria Leacock were not able to complete their planned "Waiting for Godard" documentary.
Mike Palmer
Berkeley, Calif.

•

Letters should be sent with the writer's name, address, and daytime phone number via e-mail to themail@newyorker.com. Letters may be edited for length and clarity, and may be published in any medium. We regret that owing to the volume of correspondence we cannot reply to every letter.

GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

Deeply spiritual and kinesthetically invigorating, the dances of Ronald K. Brown tend not to be politically explicit. But "The Equality of Night and Day"—performed at the Joyce, Jan. 17-22, by **Ronald K. Brown/ EVIDENCE** (Demetrius Burns, a member of the company, appears above)—is partially set to speeches by Angela Davis. A score by the jazz pianist Jason Moran threads the activist content with a subdued ritual of grief. For balance, Brown's "Open Door," with live accompaniment by the Afro Latin Jazz Ensemble, offers joy.

PHOTOGRAPH BY PARI DUKOVIC

As ever, it's advisable to check in advance to confirm engagements.

ART

Nick Cave

This Chicago-based artist achieves a paradoxical tone of elegiac flamboyance in his work, confronting the spectre of anti-Black brutality with glittering feats of assemblage and couturier-level craft. "Forothermore," the Guggenheim's three-decade survey of Cave's career, culminates in a presentation of his "Soundsuits." Initiated in response to the L.A.P.D. beating of Rodney King, in 1991, these astonishing garments are statements of protection and revolt, cobbled together from toys, artificial flowers, and synthetic hair, among many materials. The suits are often brought to life in public performances, but they vibrate with the promise of movement when installed as sculptures, too. Other pieces on view have a similar spirit of scavenged excess—Cave favors animal figurines, disassembled tole chandeliers, and elaborate beadwork—and also contain racist Americana and cast-bronze elements. In "Arm Peace," from 2019, a replica of the artist's arm and torso emerges from the wall, draped with metalwork flowers; "Sea Sick," from 2014, uses vintage paintings of ships and an anthropomorphic spittoon to reveal the pervasive legacy of the Middle Passage, even in décor. Videos screened on the museum's lower level illuminate an important aspect of Cave's art—the influence of drag culture—and offer visitors the chance to see his gorgeous Soundsuits in action, to witness how they anonymize their wearers while asserting a fantastic singularity.—*Johanna Fateman (Guggenheim Museum; through April 10.)*

Kyoko Idetsu

The title of this Japanese painter's show, "I want to wear a warm sweater," signals her guileless, declaratory approach to figuration. Idetsu's subjects—child rearing, housework, illness, the news—are rooted in everyday observations, as reflected in the first-person texts printed in an accompanying handout and written directly onto the walls. The words near a small, busy scene evoking a day-care center read "A child in potty training was fidgeting, looking like she had to pee." But mundane doesn't mean simple in Idetsu's ambitious representation of the conventionally unheroic domestic sphere. "Job relocation," a nearly eight-foot-long piece, conveys a woman's distress at a sudden change in her husband's employment in three images: a face swollen with tears, the exterior of a house, and a fraught parent-teacher conversation. The figure of the protagonist—the mother—stretches across the triptych. The effect is powerful, suggesting the narrative unfolding in her own racing mind.—*J.F. (Bridget Donahue; through Feb. 4.)*

"Just Above Midtown: Changing Spaces"

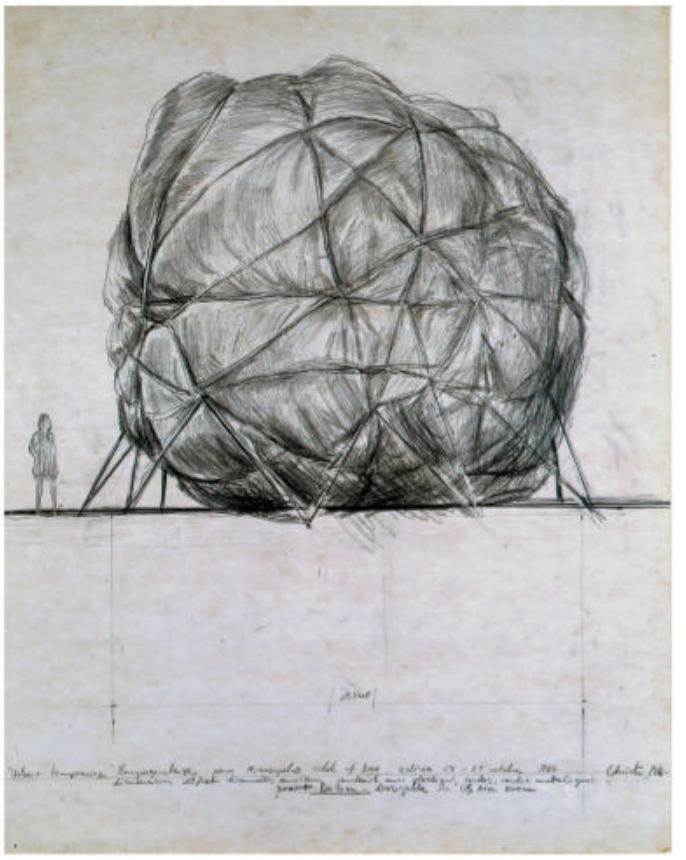
In 1974, the now legendary gallerist Linda Goode Bryant, a single mother who had worked at the Studio Museum in Harlem, opened Just Above Midtown, or JAM, in its first space, on West Fifty-seventh Street. She borrowed four thousand dollars to get it up and running, establishing what she called a "laboratory," which played host to an incredible range of artists of color at several locations until 1986. JAM was a singular place, one where an artist's meaning and intention could be expressed in an intellectually free ethos and without commercial interference: a down-home, do-it-yourself cosmos for performance art, happenings, and conceptual, rather than narrative—read: ideological—art. And what art! David Hammons, Howardena Pindell, Lorraine O'Grady, Senga Nengudi, and Lorna Simpson, among many others, had their first significant New York showings at JAM. This exhibition at MOMA, organized by the brilliant curator Thomas Jean Lax, is dense and beautifully hung, with ephemera beside video, sculptures next to documentary performance photographs, each piece jumping out at you, full of youth and surprise.—*Hilton Als (Museum of Modern Art; through Feb. 18.)*

DANCE

New York City Ballet

The new season begins (on Jan. 17), as City Ballet's seasons often do, with a week dominated by George Balanchine. In addition to familiar pieces such as "Allegro Brillante" and "Donizetti Variations," the dancers perform a rarity, "Haieff Divertimento." The piece, created in 1947 for

AT THE GALLERIES



COURTESY ESTATE OF CHRISTO V. JAVACHEFF / CHRISTO AND JEANNE-CLAUDE FOUNDATION / HELENA ANRATHER

In 1931, the Spanish modernist Julio González used the phrase "drawing in space" to describe a new sculptural language that he compared to grouping stars into constellations. **"Drawings by Sculptors,"** on view at the Helena Anrather gallery through Feb. 4, is a constellation itself, a deliriously eclectic selection of ninety works, by nearly as many artists, spanning six decades. (The show is the brainchild of Carl D'Alvia, a quick-witted American sculptor.) How to confine spatial complexities to a sheet of paper? For some participants, the answer is don't. Arlene Shechet's "Drawing Fire: It's Possible," from 2022, is a winsome glazed-ceramic slab; Wells Chandler's comically heraldic "Self Portrait as Turtle in Vest," completed this year, is crocheted from colorful textiles; the black pills in Josh Kline's succinctly ominous "Supplements," from 2022, contain the remnants of pulverized iPhones. The sculptural tradition of the preparatory drawing is also well represented, notably in a graphite study for Nari Ward's towering "Battleground Beacon," a public project installed in New Orleans, in 2021, and in Christo's pencil sketch (pictured above) of "Volume Temporaire Empaquetage"—almost three thousand helium-filled party balloons concealed within a weather balloon—conceived, in 1966, at the Minneapolis College of Art. If this treasure hunt of a show could be summed up in a single piece, the honors would go to Rosemary Mayer's shimmering arrangement of colored pencil, graphite, ink, and pastel on paper, from 1978, simply titled "Connections."—*Andrea K. Scott*

CABARET

Jackie Hoffman is one of our consummate grouches. Whether on Broadway ("Xanadu," "On the Town") or in her deadpan solo shows ("The Kvetching Continues"), she's made an art of complaining—about Upper West Side stroller culture, public displays of affection, rheumatoid arthritis, and her own thwarted attempts at stardom. That last gripe may have softened as her profile has risen: in the past year, she's shown up in "Only Murders in the Building" (as a grumpy neighbor) and "Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery" (as Dave Bautista's mom). Want to know what's bugging her at the moment? The answer lies at Joe's Pub, where, Jan. 23-24 and Feb. 17-18, she performs her new show, **"Jackie Hoffman: It's Over. Who Has Weed?"**—*Michael Schulman*

Ballet Society (a predecessor to City Ballet), contains a curious mix of sinuous partnering and jazzy inflections. It was revived three years ago, just weeks before the start of the pandemic. One of two alternating programs also includes Balanchine and Jerome Robbins's "Firebird" and Christopher Wheeldon's sombre "Liturgy," the latter set to "Fratres," by the monk-like Estonian composer Arvo Pärt.—*Marina Harss (David H. Koch; through Feb. 26.)*

Israel Galván

A flamenco dancer performing a solo concert isn't unusual, but to perform without musical accompaniment—as Galván has been doing, in his show "Solo," since 2007—counts as radical. Other aspects of Galván's polarizing style are more obviously experimental: his deconstructions and exaggerations of flamenco gesture, his absurdist posturing. But turning himself into a one-man band is a move that's both avant-garde and traditional, and Galván has the chops to play the roles of several musicians at once—with his feet, his hands, and sometimes his teeth.—*Brian Seibert (Baryshnikov Arts Center; Jan. 23-24.)*

Natalia Osipova

This is one occasion in which the title of the program, "Force of Nature," does not lie. The Russian-born Osipova, formerly of the Bolshoi and now of the Royal Ballet, is a performer of astonishing power and vitality, with jumps that shoot into the sky from out of nowhere. She eats up the stage. This one-evening visit includes some chestnuts, such as the lyrical pas de deux from the ballet "Giselle," which Osipova dances with the rising Royal Ballet star Marcelino Sambé, and a new contemporary duet ("Ashes"), performed with the choreographer (and her partner in life) Jason Kittelberger. For "Valse Triste," a pas de deux created for her by Alexei Ratmansky, she is paired with Reece Clarke, also of the Royal.—*M.H. (New York City Center; Jan. 21.)*

THE THEATRE

Kate

The comedian Kate Berlant goes meta in this one-woman show, directed by Bo Burnham, which takes the premise of an autobiographical confessional and twists it like taffy. Since she was a child, in the small seaside town of Santa Monica (ever heard of it?), Kate has dreamed of being a Hollywood actress, but her mother insists that her "big, crass style of indication has no place on camera." Can Kate overcome her self-doubt—and her career-crippling inability to cry on command? Berlant, who has a Lucille Ball-level prowess for physical comedy, plays the show's multiple characters, as well as multiple versions of herself: the starry-eyed ingénue, the tyrannical diva, the Warholian performance artist, and, truest to life, the super-talented entertainer who has yet to find her breakout role. This isn't quite it: the show, which runs long at eighty minutes, starts to sag with repetition, and the clever concept yields diminishing returns. What's for sure is that Berlant is worthy of the spotlight. "She's trying something new tonight. I respect that," one of her characters says. So do I.—*Alexandra Schwartz (Connelly Theatre; through Feb. 10.)*

Leopoldstadt

In Tom Stoppard's "Leopoldstadt," we see the Merzes and the Jakoboviczes, two intermarried and interfaith Viennese families, in five different years—1899, 1900, 1924, 1938, and, at last, 1955. The action all takes place in one apartment, which dwindles from a glittering, golden, crowded peak to the terrible bleak emptiness of post-Holocaust absence. In each section, there are characters who turn to or away from Jewishness, looking for belonging or tradition or safety. (There is, of course, no safety.) Plots and generations rush past, and Stoppard's dramaturgy-of-interruption delays and avoids emotional connection. Could this awkwardness be deliberate? Perhaps it's meant to emphasize the grief of the final scene, in which a Stoppard avatar learns how many of his cousins and aunts and grandparents died in the camps. Yet much of what's most moving about "Leopoldstadt" is not onstage in Patrick Marber's inelegant production: instead, it's in the reading that the play persuades you to do, the memories of other Stoppard pieces, and the knowledge (gleaned from interviews and his biography) of the playwright's actual revelation, when he was fifty-six, that his mother had kept secret the extent of his family's suffering.—*Helen Shaw (Reviewed in our issue of 10/17/22.) (Longacre; open run.)*

Merrily We Roll Along

The director Maria Friedman unearths the potential that Stephen Sondheim-heads have always suspected was in the composer's much beleaguered, famously flopped "Merrily"—a 1981 musical, with a clunky book by George Furth, that moves backward in time, from its characters' bitter forties to their innocent youth—by infusing it with enthusiasm, sympathy, and (not to be cheesy about it) love. This time the three old (and getting younger) friends are played by emotional fire hoses: Daniel Radcliffe's Charley fizzes like a cartoon fuse; Jonathan Groff's seraphic tenor elevates Frank, a grasping climber who can, at times, be contemptible; and Lindsay Mendez, whose staggering, trumpetlike mezzo could be used on battlefields, makes her Mary the heart of the show. Sondheim and Furth were trying to frame the hapless tenderness we feel for our present selves, not just our past ones, and the cast's palpable affection for one another papers over much of the script's awkwardness. Is this production, finally, forty years later, the definitive "Merrily"? It wouldn't be the first time that a triumphant story started in middle age.—*H.S. (12/26/22) (New York Theatre Workshop; through Jan. 22.)*

The Piano Lesson

LaTanya Richardson Jackson's star-studded Broadway revival of August Wilson's exqui-

ILLUSTRATION BY CARI VANDER YACHT

site play, from 1987, is, not to mince words, magnificent. John David Washington plays Boy Willie, the astonishing Danielle Brooks is his sister, Berniece, and Samuel L. Jackson and Michael Potts (both in incredible form) play the feuding siblings' uncles. The setting is Pittsburgh, 1936; at issue is whether to sell an elaborately carved piano that contains (both artistically and supernaturally) the suffering of their enslaved ancestors. To escape a wound or to treasure it? Balance, measure, the weighing of excellence and opposites—"The Piano Lesson" contains these in its smallest and its largest gestures. Despite Wilson himself putting his thumb on the scale (his sympathies clearly lie with Boy Willie), the production has, by casting the charismatic Brooks, evened out the argument.—*H.S. (Barrymore; through Jan. 29.)*

MUSIC

BabyTron

HIP-HOP This fast-talking rapper from Ypsilanti, Michigan, who is one of the progenitors of scam rap—a niche form born of social engineering in the digital age—turns the glitz and the bounce familiar from the sounds of nearby Detroit into propulsion for his defiant admissions. On the song "Scampire," he raps, "On Telegram with a Russian, goin' BIN for BIN," brazenly referring to stolen bank numbers. BabyTron's trollish songs are governed by irreverent sports references—with nods to the Detroit Lions wide receiver Calvin Johnson and the N.B.A. guards Luka Dončić and Steve Nash—and snarky jokes made at the expense of his victims. The charm is in the motion, in the way his rapid-fire raps communicate not only his nature as a snake-oil salesman but the gallows humor inherent to the whole performance.—*Sheldon Pearce (Market Hotel; Jan. 20.)*

Eszter Balint: "I Hate Memory!"

ROCK In the late seventies, a preteen Eszter Balint arrived in New York from Hungary, her artistic family pursuing not the American Dream so much as the downtown Manhattan one. Settling their radical theatre company near the Chelsea Hotel, the clan slipped into a fluorescent milieu—Basquiat, Sun Ra, the works—that aligned with neither the Communist regime they had ditched nor the capitalist creed of their new home. Balint grew up to be an attentive singer-songwriter and an occasional actor. In "I Hate Memory!," a song cycle that she performs at the Under the Radar Festival, the musician (at times writing with the cerebral popsmith Stew) grants a fervid tour of her avant-garde youth. Like many children of bohemia, the singer seems to have stepped into the light of adulthood in a slight daze. "Memory's a predator," she sings, by way of introduction. "The past is a dick."—*Jay Ruttenberg (Joe's Pub; Jan. 19.)*

Bloody Mary

TECHNO Back in 2020, the French-born, Berlin-dwelling techno producer and d.j. Marjorie Migliaccio, a.k.a. Bloody Mary, was set to play at Basement, only to have her plans upended by the lockdown. If anything, this makeup gig should be an even more fearsome demonstration of her no-nonsense approach on the decks. Her record label, Dame-Music, has described itself as "electro-Goth," and her produced tracks and d.j. selections have the surprisingly outgoing flair of a monochrome peacock. In a recent set recorded at Tresor, the foundational Berlin techno club where Bloody Mary is a resident, the shape-shifting acid lines of the Roland TB-303 synthesizer envelop the music like ivy.—*Michaelangelo Matos (Basement; Jan. 21.)*

Conrad Herwig and the Latin Side All-Stars

JAZZ In 1996, Conrad Herwig, a dexterous trombonist who split his time between mainstream jazz and Latin music, put an ambitious pan-musical idea into practice. With "The Latin Side of John Coltrane," Herwig applied the rhythmic conceits that he'd been using at his Latin gigs to the art of the iconic saxophonist, who had exhibited little direct involvement with that idiom. The mélange worked so well that Herwig began applying the concept to other prominent jazz artists, and a slew of enterprising recordings followed. Herwig celebrates his cross-cultural mashups all through March with a weekly Tuesday-night performance at this Tribeca club, highlighting such figureheads as Charles Mingus, Horace Silver, Joe Henderson, Herbie Hancock, Wayne Shorter, Miles Davis, and, of course, Coltrane. His All-Star band should not be short of rhythmic zest, with the drummer Robby Ameen and the percussionist Camilo Molina providing the spice.—*Steve Futterman (The Django; Jan. 24.)*

Improv Nights—A Tribute to Derek Bailey

EXPERIMENTAL In 1992, Derek Bailey, the English titan of free improvisation, wrote and narrated a four-part television documentary, "On the Edge: Improvisation in Music." The docuseries, based on the guitarist's 1980 book, investigated spontaneity, flexibility, and risktaking in sound, spanning church organists, Indian ragas, Mozart, and schoolchildren. It also profiled the saxophonist John Zorn, who discussed Stockhausen while clad in a Napalm Death shirt and compared his own improvising unit to "a psychodrama." Bailey, who died in 2005, is honored this month with a sweeping three-night tribute anchored by Zorn. The events are billed as a testament to Bailey and to "the ever-thriving, ever-expanding Downtown Scene," and they mark a convergence of generations and a programmatic feat. Zorn is joined by a rotating cast that includes the avant icons Laurie Anderson and Ikue Mori, the guitarists Bill Frisell, Mary Halvorson, and Wendy Eisenberg, the saxophonists Matana Roberts and Immanuel Wilkins, the bassist Brandon Lopez, and the vibraphonist Joel Ross.—*Jenn Pelly (Roulette; Jan. 19-21.)*

"The Magic of Schubert"

CLASSICAL The Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center's wintertime festival of Schubert's smaller-scale pieces begins this week, naturally, with "Winterreise," an early masterpiece of the song-cycle form, featuring the baritone Nikolay Borchev. Little jewels turn up across five programs, with the Escher String Quartet offering the heavenly strains of "Quartettsatz" (Jan. 24) and the soprano Joélle Harvey duetting with the hornist Kevin Rivard in the extended art song "Auf dem Strom" (Feb. 10 and Feb. 12). In something of a bonus, the Chamber Music Society traces Schubert's legacy through various compositions, including Mahler's "Rückert-Lieder" (Feb. 3). The piece's painfully intimate dimensions recall the reflections of "Winterreise"—only this time the narrator (the mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano) wrestles not with a broken-off romance but with the nature of art and love itself.—*Oussama Zahr (Alice Tully Hall; Jan. 22 and Jan. 24.)*

JAZZ

David Murray, his artistic candle lit at both ends, was a Promethean jazz force during the eighties and nineties—playing uninhibited tenor saxophone and bass clarinet, organizing myriad bands, composing ear-catching anthems, and initiating enterprising projects. He also recorded, recorded, and recorded some more. The following decades found the musician stepping back from the limelight, yet subsequent albums and live appearances—now more sporadic, giving both player and audience time to absorb it all—display an undiminished zest and an imaginative force. A prestige gig at the Village Vanguard, Jan. 18-22, finds Murray fronting a quartet beefed up with smart younger players: the pianist Marta Sánchez, the bassist Luke Stewart, and the drummer Kassa Overall.—*Steve Futterman*

ILLUSTRATION BY GAURAB THAKALI

MOVIES

Heat

Incredibly cool characters pull off violent yet debonair crimes in the heart of a supermodern American city: yes, it's a Michael Mann film. Here, he turns his attention to Los Angeles, where an anguished cop (Al Pacino) goes head to head with a troubled villain (Robert De Niro). The movie looks happiest at night, but the feline grace of the camera's moves is betrayed by a portentous script; Diane Venora, as the detective's wife, has some particularly gruesome lines to deliver. The film, which runs on and on for nearly three hours, yearns to be much more than a thriller—it wants to diagnose the sickness of men's souls and convey the nobility of their pain. The irony is that as a thriller it works just fine; the set pieces, including an unstoppable gun battle outside a bank, are adrenaline dreams. The taciturn De Niro and the braying Pacino share a flawless scene over a cup of coffee, but the real honors go to Val Kilmer and Ashley Judd as a warring, loving couple. Kilmer can blow you away, with or without a gun. Released in 1995.—*Anthony Lane (Reviewed in our issue of 12/25/95.) (Streaming on TUBI, Hulu, and other services.)*

M3GAN

This sci-fi-rooted horror caper, directed by Gerard Johnstone, offers gleefully clever twists on the "Frankenstein" theme. Gemma (Allison Williams), an ambitious, tightly controlled and controlling robotics engineer at a major toy company, invents the titular doll-like robot, life-size and A.I.-equipped, which is meant to serve children as a synthetic friend. Then Gemma becomes the guardian to her young niece, Cady (Violet McGraw), whose parents have died in a car crash; Gemma, who's unprepared for child rearing and needs to demonstrate M3gan for her bosses, makes Cady the lifelike toy's test subject. The bereaved child becomes excessively attached to M3gan, and the toy, programmed to protect the girl and given no built-in code of conduct, ruthlessly dispatches anyone who threatens—or even contradicts—Cady, or who tries to dial back its ferocity. The script's superficial tut-tutting at Gemma's cold careerism and her mercenary corporate bosses is a flat backdrop to the diabolical display of M3gan's Machiavellian wiles and the Grand Guignol ingenuity of the doll's methods of mayhem. A few point-of-view shots showing M3gan's internal video screen—with its numerical calculations of human emotions—hint at a far more substantial drama lurking within.—*Richard Brody (In theatrical release.)*

Sullivan's Travels

In 1941, during the ongoing Depression, the writer and director Preston Sturges—already renowned for his comedies—made a movie about a wealthy director, John L. Sullivan (Joel McCrea), who is renowned for his comedies but wants to make a serious film about the lives of the poor—which he'd call "O Brother, Where Art Thou?" Sturges's inside-Hollywood story quickly gets outside the movie capital: to do research, Sullivan disguises himself as a hobo, takes to the road, and meets an unsuccessful young actress (Veronica Lake), whose name is never heard. They ride the rails together, but when Sullivan gets into trouble, Sturges's lighthearted romance turns into exactly the kind of grimly realistic drama that Sullivan aspires to make. This ingenious plot is brought to life with a remarkable profusion of dialogue: with the characters' torrential, scintillating verbiage, Sturges seems to leap out from behind the screen to address the viewer directly. Few classic filmmakers with so much to say manage to find so many splendid words to say it in.—*R.B. (Screening at Film Forum and streaming on Prime Video, Google Play, and other services.)*

The Traveler

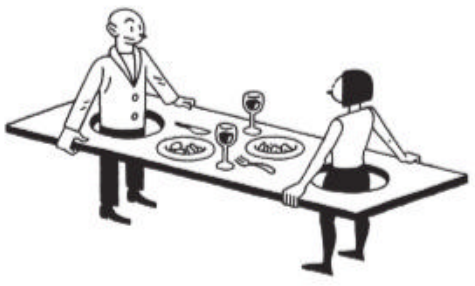
The director Abbas Kiarostami's first full-length feature, from 1974, is a sort of Iranian version of "The 400 Blows." Qassem (Hassan Darabi) is an indifferent small-town schoolboy but a big-time soccer fan. With the help of a classmate, he steals and scrounges enough money to go by bus to attend a major soccer match in Tehran. Made for an educational institution, the movie offers some up-front didactic suggestions—notably, it encourages parents to take an active interest in their children's studies—but Kiarostami's patient, detailed, and wry attention to the infinitesimal practicalities of daily life yields a deep critical cross-section of Iranian society. His incisive, sharply etched images reveal emotional cruelty and physical brutality at school, the burden of economic inequality, the enormous cultural gap between the countryside and the capital, and even the ambient pressure of police authority in the Shah's repressive state. Already, Kiarostami's meticulous naturalism displayed a type of symbolism, as well as a reflexive view of the cinema itself: a scene in which the boys raise money by "photographing" classmates using a camera without film is an enduring anthology piece.—*R.B. (Streaming on the Criterion Channel.)*

For more reviews, visit
newyorker.com/goings-on-about-town

WHAT TO STREAM

© WARNER BROTHERS / EVERETT

The nineteen-nineties were a boom time for independent and low-budget filmmaking, but the industry did a poor job of sustaining the careers of many of the best directors to emerge then. One such filmmaker is Nancy Savoca, whose second feature, **"Dogfight"** (streaming on HBO Max, Prime Video, and other services), builds an intense teen romance on a large map of history and mores. The movie, from 1991, is set mainly on November 21, 1963—the day before the assassination of President John F. Kennedy—in San Francisco, where an eighteen-year-old marine recruit, Eddie Birdlace (River Phoenix), has a day's leave before shipping out. He and a young waitress, Rose Fenny (Lili Taylor), meet the opposite of cute: he invites her to a party that, unbeknownst to her, is actually a cruel competition in which he and his buddies strive to bring the girl they deem the ugliest. It's no surprise that, despite Eddie's heartless deceit, he and Rose—a socially awkward aspiring folksinger—forge a real bond. The jolt is in the intricate expressivity Savoca brings to the story, with a repertoire of precise and painterly images that highlight performances of assertive yet graceful physicality.—*Richard Brody*



TABLES FOR TWO

SYKO
126 Windsor Pl., Brooklyn

The best thing to eat at SYKO, a restaurant that opened last year, in Windsor Terrace, is one of the best things I've ever eaten: the Fatboy, an evocatively, and accurately, named sandwich. A thick, crisp-edged Korean-style scallion pancake with a mochi-like texture (thanks to potato starch) is layered with sticky white rice, frilly romaine lettuce, a few crunchy batons of *danmuji* (sweet pickled daikon, dyed neon yellow with turmeric), and a choice of protein—beef bulgogi, chicken bulgogi, or fried tofu strewn with kimchi. Then it's tightly rolled into a stubby cylinder and sliced in half, to be doctored to taste with the house-made gochugaru-based *yangnyeomjang* sauce.

The origin story of this glorious creation tells the origin story of the restaurant. In 2013, the siblings Mazen and Rosette Khoury moved, with their brother and their mother, from Syria to Brooklyn. That same year, Rosette met her now husband, James Kim, who is Korean American and grew up in Windsor Terrace, where his parents own a grocery store. Thanks to Kim, Mazen—who co-owned a small takeout shop with Rosette in their hometown and is a graduate of Emma's Torch, a Brooklyn restaurant that trains refugees—became enamored of Korean food. One day, as the blended family shared a meal of home-cooked Korean barbecue, folding lettuce leaves around bulgogi and rice, Mazen saw a connection to Arabic cuisine: Why not take it one step further and wrap it all into a sandwich, as is often done with shawarma?

The Fatboy falls shy of fusion, as does SYKO (a portmanteau of Syrian and Korean), which is co-owned by the three Khoury siblings and Kim. Mazen, who devised the menu, experimented with combining elements of each cuisine but decided that he was better off presenting them side by side, like the syllables of the restaurant's name. Behind the counter are two discrete sets of components: Korean on the left (carrot matchsticks, gochujang, sautéed shiitake) and Syrian on the right (labneh, tahini, fried cauliflower), an arrangement mirrored on the menu.

In the course of several SYKO meals, both at home and in the store, which has only a few seats (the bulk of the restaurant's business is takeout and delivery), I tried to determine whether one cuisine was better executed than the other. I was happy to find that—putting aside the Fatboy, which is in a league of its own—the categories scored neck and neck. The same (halal) beef and chicken used for the bulgogi becomes shawarma, marinated in cinnamon and cumin instead of Asian pear and mirin and served with rice or fries, or wrapped in both pita and *saj*, a thinner flatbread, with either tomato and onion or pickles and pomegranate molasses.

I was just as happy with the vegetarian *kimbap*, seaweed rice rolls packed with spinach, carrots, cucumber, pickled radish, and zucchini, as I was with the vegetarian kibbeh, cracked-wheat dough formed into pleasingly chewy, kidney-shaped disks. The potato, that great equalizer, is prepared to spectacular effect on both menus: cut into strips, then blanched and stir-fried in sesame oil for silky Korean home fries; deep-fried, Syrian style, into crisp nuggets saturated with a crimson hot sauce called *shatta*, and flecked with cilantro and garlic; boiled, gently mashed, and mixed with parsley, fat chunks of scallion, olive oil, and lemon juice, for a cold salad.

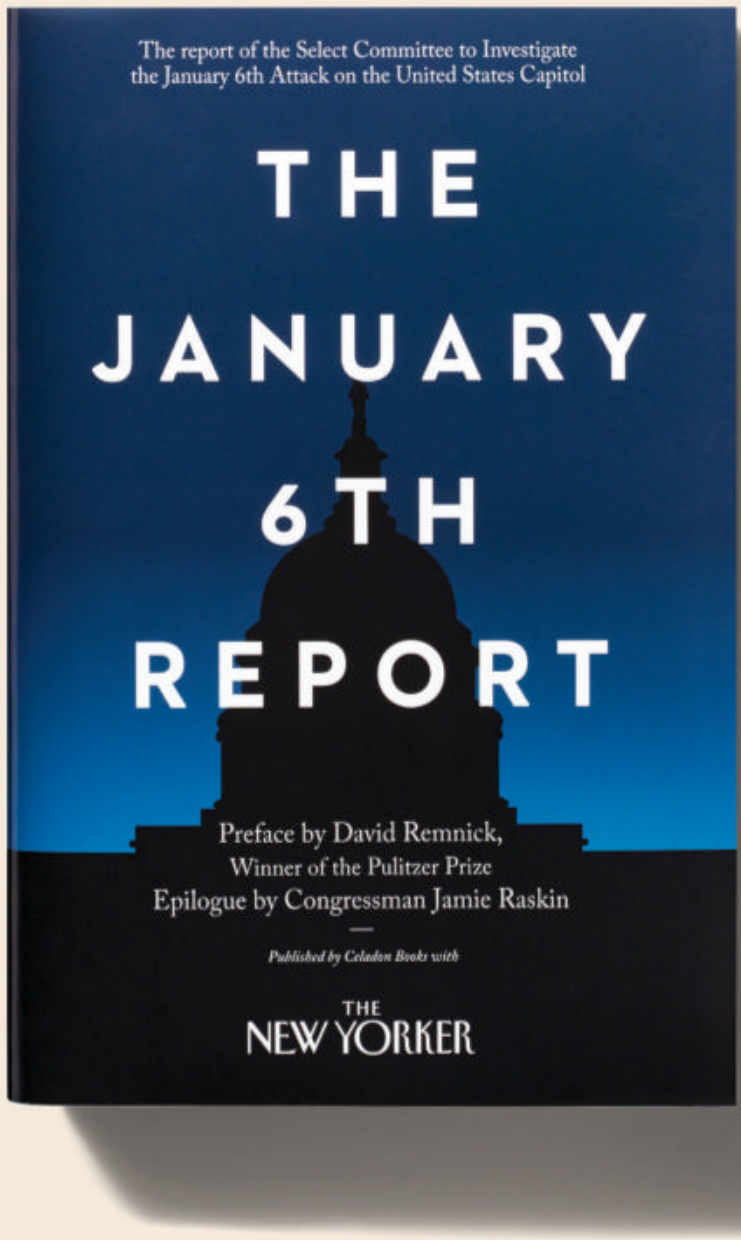
For dessert, there are *hotteok*, small pancakes filled with brown sugar and cinnamon, and medjool dates stuffed with peanut butter, encased in dark chocolate, and rolled in rose petals or shredded coconut. On the wall above SYKO's refrigerated-drinks case, a mural depicts the Manhattan street signs marking the bygone Little Syria neighborhood (at Rector and Washington, through the nineteen-forties) and the still thriving Koreatown (Broadway and West Thirty-second). Small plaques explain that both groups of immigrants first arrived in the eighteen-eighties, two tracks converging. *(Dishes $5–$26.50.)*

—Hannah Goldfield

PHOTOGRAPH BY LANDON SPEERS FOR THE NEW YORKER; ILLUSTRATION BY JOOST SWARTE

THE NEW YORKER

Now a
New York *Times*
best-seller.



"A must-read for
politics-watchers."
–Kirkus Reviews

Essential for every citizen.

With a preface by *The New Yorker's* editor,
David Remnick, and an epilogue by Representative
Jamie Raskin, a member of the House select commitee.

Visit newyorker.com/store.

CO-PUBLISHED WITH

CELADON
BOOKS

Scan to buy.

THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
NO DIRECTION

The simplest thing, usually, for a new congressional majority to do is elect a Speaker of the House. Often, the choice has been made in advance: the candidate grins, the chyron gives the tally, a press conference announcing the legislative agenda awaits. This month, the House Republicans, who won a slim majority in November, took fifteen votes and nearly a week to settle on Kevin McCarthy, even though he has led the Party since 2019 and had no serious opponent. The holdouts were about twenty members of the Party's far-right wing, but, even as each vote ended and the next one began, no one really seemed able to say what the conflict was about. John James, whose election in November made him the first Black Republican to represent Michigan in Congress, and who supported McCarthy, pointed out that the last time it had taken so many votes to pick a Speaker was in 1856. "The issues today are over a few rules and personalities," James said. "While the issues at that time were about slavery and whether the value of a man who looks like me was sixty per cent or a hundred per cent of a human being."

The dividing line between the large number of Republicans backing McCarthy and the smaller, obstinate group standing in his way wasn't exactly ideological. Each camp included some of the prominent election deniers of the House Freedom Caucus. Ohio's Jim Jordan, long one of the most prominent hardliners, was in position to chair the Judiciary Committee, and had allied with McCarthy; so had the Georgia conspiracist Marjorie Taylor Greene, who had reportedly been promised a top committee assignment. The rebels included the Stop the Steal stalwarts Paul Gosar and Scott Perry, as well as the media-focussed right-wingers: Lauren Boebert, of Colorado, who faced calls to be stripped of committee assignments after making anti-Muslim slurs about her Democratic colleague Ilhan Omar; and Matt Gaetz, of Florida, who has been the subject of a federal investigation for sex trafficking but has not faced any charges. Up close, the distinction between these factions sometimes collapsed into personal grievances or turf war. The most dramatic moment came when the McCarthy ally Mike Rogers, of Alabama, lunged toward Gaetz, and was physically restrained. Only later did Politico report that Gaetz had been lobbying to run a subcommittee of the House Armed Services Committee, which Rogers was set to chair.

This mess of personality conflicts and power struggles reflects a core Republican problem right now. The style of the Party is thoroughly Trumpist, and yet its agenda is no longer defined by Trump's specific fixations and fights. Before the fourth vote, the former President issued a statement urging all Republicans to support McCarthy; that failed to move anyone. In the final phase, Greene got Trump on speakerphone and tried to persuade one holdout, Montana's Matt Rosendale, to talk with him. Rosendale, who is enough of a Trump stalwart that he had voted against awarding a Gold Medal to the police officers who defended the Capitol on January 6th, just waved Greene and the former President away.

In many ways, the G.O.P. has underprepared for the post-Trump era. In 2020, Republicans declined to put forward any formal platform, and they went light on policy in the 2022 midterm campaigns, hoping instead that a reaction against economic inflation and President Biden's unpopularity would sweep them to big majorities. Even Newt Gingrich, interviewed in the *Times* this month, drew a pointed distinction between the Republican insurgents whom he organized around the Contract with America, in 1994, and the current generation. "We weren't just grandstanders. We were purposeful," Gingrich said. (He also accused Gaetz of "essentially bringing 'Lord of the Flies' to the House of Representatives.") In addition to a murky agenda, the Republicans have a weak leader in McCarthy, who is neither especially well known among his

ILLUSTRATIONS BY JOÃO FAZENDA

party's voters nor especially well liked by them. A Monmouth poll last month found that just twenty-nine per cent of Republicans approved of McCarthy, twenty per cent disapproved, and about half had no opinion.

Against this backdrop, the way that McCarthy eventually won over his opponents may provide a clue to how he will operate. Mostly, he traded leverage away for support. He agreed to lower the threshold for replacing a Speaker, and to keep a McCarthy-aligned super PAC from picking sides in Republican primaries. Substantively, he agreed to establish a new select subcommittee on the "weaponization" of the federal government which Jordan is expected to lead, and is likely to begin with investigations into the Obama-era classified documents that recently turned up in an office that President Biden had used and at his home. (The new Speaker has also agreed to consider formally expunging Trump's impeachment.) More ominously, McCarthy agreed not to raise the debt ceiling without extracting offsetting spending cuts. That concession suggests that the House's year, which seems set to start with investigations into Hunter Biden and border policy, may be punctuated with a standoff over the debt ceiling, in which Republicans threaten to default on the government's debt in the name of small-government principle. And he gave opponents the committee seats they wanted. Fox News asked Byron Donalds, a second-term Black congressman from Florida, whom the insurgents had repeatedly nominated for Speaker, "What did you get?" The answer was a spot on the Party's steering committee. Gaetz said that the opposition to McCarthy's election stopped because "we ran out of stuff to ask for."

If this is, in fact, how the new Speaker has to govern, by cutting individual deals in order to preserve his majority, then his tenure is likely to move from crisis to crisis and may well be short. Already there are little fires everywhere in the caucus: some moderates have balked at the concessions made to the Gaetz faction, at the possibility that McCarthy's debt-ceiling commitments will mean sharp defense cuts, and even at the caucus's extreme line on abortion, which South Carolina's Nancy Mace, a McCarthy ally, denounced as "tone deaf." The main preoccupation of McCarthy's first week as Speaker was the case of the freshman Representative George Santos, of New York, who, in his bid for office, appears to have made up just about every element of his biography: a sterling business record, Jewish heritage, even a star turn on the Baruch College volleyball team. (He was also wanted for fraud in Brazil.) Both the Nassau County G.O.P. and the five other freshman Republicans from New York have called for him to resign, but not McCarthy, whom Santos supported and who doesn't have the margin to cut loose even an obvious liability. It might seem like good news for Democrats that the Republican leadership is this weak—except that weak Republican leadership is what paved the way for Trump in the first place.

—Benjamin Wallace-Wells

TWO WHEELS DEPT.

JUMPER

On a chilly Monday afternoon, in Washington Square Park, Jerome Peel wheeled a bike up to some stairs near the Giuseppe Garibaldi statue. "This is where we're gonna set up," he said. A friend plopped a portable plywood ramp on the ground. "This is scary, but I think it should fly right up," Peel said. He turned to another friend: "James, are you comfortable with me jumping over you?" A shaggy-haired skateboarder named James Hernandez said, "I trust you, for some reason." Hernandez sat on the ground behind the ramp. Nearby, two guys selling weed watched as Peel raced up the ramp and soared into the air, over Hernandez, and past the stairs, skidding on the concrete and almost crashing into a fence that was protecting the lawn.

"Oh, shit!" one of the guys selling weed said.

"One more time! Encore, encore!" the other guy shouted.

Peel wore black corduroys and a Patagonia parka, and rode an eighty-two-pound shiny electric Citi Bike—a.k.a. the Ghost, the Hellcat, the White Stallion. "It flies like a spaceship," he said. ("Dude, after four fucking Bud Lights I feel like I've made it to Oklahoma!" a friend added.) After the jump, Peel said, "There's not much stopping room." He eyed the fence and turned to a friend who was filming the stunt on a camcorder. "You don't carry a packing knife on you, do you?" he asked. Peel wanted to cut the zip ties that held the fence together so he could ride over it. He approached the weed dealers. "Yo! You guys have any scissors, or a box cutter, or something?"

"I only got a butcher knife on me," one of them said.

"You got a *butcher knife*?"

"Gotta stay safe!" the other salesman replied.

"I'ma let you use it," the first one added.

Peel took the knife, dismantled the fence, and prepared for his next stunt. "Everybody hop in there, and I'll hit it real quick," he said. Three friends gathered behind the ramp, along with the two dealers, and Peel jumped over them.

"So you guys are, like, big risktakers?" the butcher-knife guy asked.

"Nah, *he's* the daredevil," one of Peel's friends replied.

Peel is known around town as Citi Bike Boyz. "It's just me, but it sounds

Jerome Peel

better when it's a crew," he said. His Instagram account has about ninety thousand followers; his helpers, the Boyz, scout new tricks, record stunts, and, occasionally, put their lives on the line for a viral video. Peel moved to New York for college from Florida eleven years ago, without his bike. He missed jumping curbs. "When I got on a Citi Bike for the first time, it was like a big BMX bike," he said. "I just started jumping it, and it worked great. They're built so strong. They're built to just take abuse." (Citi Bike declined to comment.) "I think part of the reason my account's not banned is that I keep people riding Citi Bikes."

Peel, who is thirty-two, continued, "I want to eventually get it to the point where, like, Citi Bike BMXing is a hobby, a full hobby." He pulled out his iPhone. "I have all these D.M.s of people doing some silly shit." Someone messaged him a video of a Citi Bike three-sixty. "That's what I like to see. Innovation!"

Peel and his Boyz cruised down Broadway; a guy driving a cargo van shouted at them, "I'm fucking seeing kings in the street. Let's *go-o-o!*" Peel tried to jump a fire hydrant, and instead crashed into the doors of a Duane Reade, causing a reflector to fly off his rear wheel. He went to fetch a new bike. The nearest dock wasn't working. "I try to speak highly about this program," he said, "but the docks are constantly broken."

He found another dock and another bike for the day's finale: jumping into the back of an empty delivery truck. He rode around SoHo searching for the perfect one, but none of the trucks he saw was quite right: too full (FedEx), too easy (UPS, Amazon), too dangerous ("I don't want to get decapitated").

Suddenly, the perfect truck—empty, driverless—materialized, parked in front of a golfing store. "It'll do," Peel said. One of the Boyz positioned the plywood ramp. Peel hit the kicker, and sailed into the back of the truck with a thump. He did it again, and again. *Thump*, *thump*.

Nearby, a tourist from Switzerland said, "What the fuck? I didn't thought he'd make it with that shitty bike!" A skater in an orange NASA jacket said, "Duuuuude. I would probably break my ribs!" An onlooking cyclist asked Peel if he had ever destroyed a Citi Bike. "A couple bikes got broken, but it's not every day," he answered. More often, he's the one that gets hurt. Hundreds of jumps (and gaps and wheelies and bunny hops) take their toll. One time, in Bed-Stuy, he face-planted into a manhole cover; last fall, he smashed into a tree. "After that crash, I took a bath with some Epsom salt," he said. "It was the first bath I took in several years."

—Adam Iscoe

"I want a place that's fireproof, floodproof, windproof, and close to a Trader Joe's."

• •

THE MUSICAL LIFE

WET LEG ON THE HOOF

You can learn something about a person from the way she paints a pot. That's the premise that brought Rhian Teasdale and Hester Chambers, the women of Wet Leg, a British indie-rock band that is among the nominees for Best New Artist at this year's Grammy Awards, to the Painted Pot, a crafting space in Park Slope, on a recent wintry afternoon. Teasdale, the main singer and songwriter, wore a Buffy T-shirt and a crocheted cap over her silky brown hair. Chambers, blond, with delicate features, was draped in a long cardigan.

After browsing the bisques—fired clay forms that are ready for painting and glazing—Teasdale chose a mug and Chambers a plate. Sitting side by side at a paint-speckled picnic table, they took to their tasks far more diligently than did the rowdy children filtering in for their after-school activity. Wet Leg was taking a victory lap. But in spite of five Grammy nominations, four sold-out New York shows, and upcoming dates opening for Harry Styles, the two women, both nearing thirty, remember what it's like to play shows for four people. They appear to be taking nothing for granted.

"Wet leg" is a term that inhabitants of the Isle of Wight, where Teasdale and Chambers grew up, apply to day-trippers and holiday-makers who ferry across the five miles from Southampton, on England's southern coast. ("D.F.L.," short for "down from London," and "overners," from "over the water," are others.) Teasdale noted that her mother had been a ferryboat captain: "She was something of a badass." At the band's high-energy live shows, Teasdale captains the stage, but she avoids the storms of sexist comments flung at them for daring to play electric guitars before they've achieved the mastery to shred.

Chambers, who seems like the more

introverted of the pair, said, in a small, high voice, "I'm not allowed to read the comments."

A winged creature that Teasdale named Angel-bat had begun to take shape on her mug, its webbed arms spread wide. As she worked on the image, she sang softly, "Angel-bat, I love you, but you're bringing me down." The band had seen LCD Soundsystem in their Williamsburg residency the night before.

Wet Leg, with its deadpan wit and post-punk guitar sound, loosely resembles the B-52s, if Cindy Wilson and Kate Pierson had led the band. They chose their name, Teasdale explained, "as a reminder not to take ourselves too seriously, because we're in a band called Wet Leg." She limned the band's origins: "I was, like, 'Hester, I really want to start a band where we play guitars.'" At that point, the two former school friends had been playing music separately and aimlessly for almost ten years, without success. "And Hester was, like, 'O.K., then, let's start a band where we both play guitars.' And I was, like, 'But, Hester, I don't play guitar.'" As a solo act, Teasdale had played keyboard. "And Hester was, like, 'That doesn't matter—you soon will!'"

Rhian Teasdale and Hester Chambers

On her plate, Chambers was skillfully rendering a horse, in fine detail. Angel-bat stood ready to embrace whatever was coming; Chambers's steed looked poised to bolt.

"I realized you don't get anywhere indulging your insecurities," Teasdale went on. "I spent many years doing that, and I was just so sick of listening to that voice saying, 'You're not good enough to do this. This space is not for you.'"

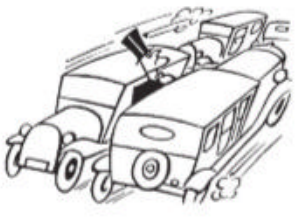
When they began making music together, Teasdale spent six weeks sleeping on a chaise longue at Chambers's flat. It was uncomfortable, "but I spent so much time sleeping on it I became at one with the lumps," she said. When they weren't trying to write songs, they took pleasure in pronouncing the syllables "shays lawnja" to each other. Goofing around at home late one night, Teasdale picked up a mike and sang, "On the chaise longue, on the chaise longue, all day long on the chaise longue," the first of the band's memorable hooks. Their single "Chaise Longue" appeared in June, 2021; "Wet Dream," another banger, followed in September.

Teasdale and Chambers have been touring non-stop for nearly a year; they haven't been home for more than a few days since last February. At the Painted Pot, the mug and the plate they decorated suggested a yearning for home and domesticity, but they are unlikely to return to those anytime soon.

"Now I go to all these hotels," Teasdale said, "and the beds technically are really comfy, and the pillows are really soft, but I'm so restless. I need my lumpy chaise longue."

—John Seabrook

PLATE PATROL
VIGILANTE



A crime wave can be a boon to the media—dramatic content, urgent headlines. The other afternoon, in lower Manhattan, Gersh Kuntzman, the former *Post* and *Daily News* columnist, who now runs Streetsblog NYC, set out to document a crime wave of his own making. He slipped on fluorescent gloves and mounted his silver-and-lime bike, which was covered with stickers ("FUCK CARS") and outfitted with a black pannier. Inside: paper towels and a blue acrylic paint pen. The goal: to restore license plates whose numbers had been intentionally obscured, a common, illegal tactic employed by drivers looking to evade the city's speeding-ticket cameras. The restoration work was not exactly legal, either. Kuntzman held up a lanyard. "I always have my press pass," he said, "just in case we get into a fight."

Gersh Kuntzman

In November, a Brooklyn lawyer had been arrested for "criminal mischief" for undefacing a plate. Inspired by the news, Kuntzman began filming similar acts of vigilantism and posting them on Twitter, along with an earworm theme song he'd written, to call attention to the problem. On his lower-Manhattan ride, he found his first offender on Lafayette Street near Walker: a Lexus with a chunk of paint missing from the letter "D" on the back plate. Kuntzman, a hammy fifty-seven-year-old with a short beard, whipped out his pen and his phone to record himself coloring it in, using the plate's embossing as a guide. "There it is," he said. "Nice, clean plate."

He headed south, past a row of cars infringing liberally on a new bike lane. He slowed before Worth Street, at a silver Mercedes parked in a crosswalk. The car's plates were encased in opaque plastic—impossible for the cameras to read. On the dash: an M.T.A. Police placard.

A man in a suit approached hesitantly and placed a toddler in the Mercedes's back seat. A woman in a short white dress and carrying a red bouquet opened the passenger door. Kuntzman

shamed them for the plate cover. "We just got married, sir," the woman said. "Can you calm down?"

Kuntzman offered congratulations and rode off. Such confrontations, he said, were rare. Once, in Brooklyn, he snapped two cars bearing identical plates. A woman came up to him and asked why he was taking photos of her car. "I said, 'I'm not,'" Kuntzman recalled, "which was a lie." Later, he called 311 and reported her.

He entered Federal Plaza, a hotbed of malfeasance. "It wouldn't dawn on most members of the public to cover their plate," Kuntzman explained. But law-enforcement types do it all the time. He filmed a gray S.U.V. with covered plates and a mysterious federal placard, and a silver Subaru Impreza with the same type of obscuration and I.D. Down the block, the bumper protector on a Hyundai Elantra with FEMA and D.E.A. markings tactfully hid the rear plate's final digit. Kuntzman's favorite method of concealment? Leaves carefully wedged under a plate's frame. " 'Oh, officer, I was parked under a tree last night,'" he said, imitating such a culprit, " 'and a leaf fell and happened to cover the "F" on my plate!'"

On Bowery, Kuntzman stopped to scribble in the missing characters on the plate of a health-care van ("They're probably curing the sick and helping the ill, but they're also criminal miscreants," he said) and to speak with the perplexed driver of a FedEx truck that had no back plate at all. ("Want me to draw one in?" Kuntzman asked.) He surveyed the lot near 1 Police Plaza. Uneventful. "Top brass tend not to engage in this kind of thing," he said. Then he checked another police lot, beneath a ramp to the Brooklyn Bridge.

He stopped at a Hyundai that offered a subject for the final video of his lunchtime hunt. The paint on one side of the front plate was missing entirely, leaving an expanse of naked tin. "You can't say this is normal wear and tear," Kuntzman said into his camera. A burly man in a black parka walked by, looking annoyed. Kuntzman reached for his paint marker, then decided that, given the location, he'd let it go. "I'm not gonna pull out my pen," he said, grinning. "But you know I could."

—Dan Greene

SKETCHPAD BY EMILY FLAKE

BILLIONAIRES: WHY DO THEY WANT TO GO TO SPACE?
BLOW UP RULING PLANET OF EX-GIRLFRIEND'S STAR SIGN
WHO'S "SUCH A VIRGO" NOW, HUH??
BOOM
HEARD VENUSIAN ATMOSPHERE IS A WICKED GOOD HIGH
OH, YEAHHH, UH-OH
SO NO ONE CAN HEAR THEM SCREAM
WHY DIDN'T YOU LOVE ME, DADDDYYYY?
JUST MARKING THE MOON WITH HIS SCENT, THAT'S ALL
SCOOT
SCOOT
SCOOT
e.flake

LETTER FROM SOUTH CAROLINA

THE SWAMP

Could corruption have led Alex Murdaugh to murder his wife and son?

BY JAMES LASDUN

In the early hours of February 24, 2019, a seventeen-foot-long fishing boat entered a narrow coastal inlet near Beaufort, South Carolina. It was foggy, the passengers were navigating with a flashlight, and they had been drinking all evening. At around 2:30 A.M., a bridge loomed up in the dark, and the boat hit pilings before running up the nearest bank, with a gashed hull. Three of the six people on board, all young adults, were thrown into the icy water. Two resurfaced, but there was no sign of the third, a nineteen-year-old named Mallory Beach. Her body was found a week later, in a marsh a few miles away.

There was some uncertainty at first about who was steering the boat at the moment of impact, but it was known to be one of two young men. Both had consumed alcohol, though the survivors reported that one of them, a nineteen-year-old named Paul Murdaugh, was more inebriated than the other. He had slipped into an aggressive alter ego, nicknamed Timmy by his friends. One of the passengers later testified, "When they can tell he's drunk, somebody will say, 'All right. Here comes Timmy. We got to go.'" The boat belonged to Paul's family, and he was behind the wheel for most of the evening. However, Paul's friend Connor Cook had sometimes taken over while Paul stepped away to argue with his girlfriend, eventually hitting her. Whoever was steering faced dire consequences if found responsible for the accident. But there was a significant disparity of power and privilege: Connor was a construction worker, and Paul was a Murdaugh.

The surname, pronounced "Murdock," was a potent charm in the state's southernmost region, known as the Lowcountry. Since 1920, three generations of Murdaughs had presided as solicitors—prosecutors—over the Fourteenth Judicial Circuit, while also amassing a small fortune from private litigation through the family firm. The solicitorship passed out of the family in 2005, but Paul's father, Alex, served as a volunteer in the office and apparently retained close ties to local law enforcement.

Four of the survivors of the boat accident were brought to the hospital, where an officer entered Paul's room to take a statement. Paul was just starting when his father and his grandfather barged in. "I am his lawyer starting now," the grandfather, Randolph Murdaugh III, told the officer, according to law-enforcement records. "He isn't giving any statements." While Randolph stood watch, Alex Murdaugh began wandering around the hospital, in an apparent effort, as one witness put it, "to orchestrate something."

A towering ginger-haired man, Alex was hard to miss. Numerous witnesses observed him going in and out of the survivors' rooms. A hospital employee heard him repeatedly warn Connor Cook not to say anything. In a later deposition, Cook recalled Alex promising him that "everything was going to be all right. I just needed to keep my mouth shut and tell them I didn't know who was driving."

As the investigation continued, however, Cook and his parents came to suspect that the Murdaughs were trying to pin the blame on him, possibly with the connivance of local law enforcement. Fortunately for Cook, the other survivors eventually testified with near-certainty—in one case revising a previous statement—that Paul had crashed the boat, and in April, 2019, Paul was charged with three crimes, including boating under the influence resulting in death. But the Murdaughs' ability to shape events was far from exhausted.

Judges in South Carolina are elected

The Murdaugh melodrama has been marked by one brutal swerve after another.

ILLUSTRATION BY VALENTIN TKACH

not by voters but by the state's General Assembly. To defend Paul, who pleaded not guilty, the Murdaughs hired Dick Harpootlian, a powerful state senator and a member of the Senate Judiciary Committee. "Harpootlian's edge is his built-in advantage with the judges," a prominent Charleston attorney told me. An acquittal for Paul could have placed Cook under a cloud of suspicion, and permanently muddied the question of culpability in Mallory Beach's death.

But there would be no trial. On the night of June 7, 2021, the case took the first in a series of brutal swerves that were to become its hallmark. Paul and his mother, Maggie, were found dead outside the kennels at Moselle, the Murdaughs' seventeen-hundred-acre hunting estate. It was Alex who reported the crime, calling 911 shortly after ten o'clock. He told police that he'd just returned home after spending most of the evening out. Paul had been shot at close range twice, with a shotgun. Maggie had been shot multiple times, with an assault rifle.

Like most observers, I assumed that the murders were vengeance (or preëmptive justice) for Beach's death. A radically different possibility was raised by a local media site, FITSNews, which reported that Alex was a person of interest in the killings. But the claim was widely dismissed as a baseless slur against a grieving husband and father.

Three months later, another swerve: Alex again called 911, telling the dispatcher that he'd been shot in the head by a stranger while changing a flat tire on his car. His story seemed to confirm the existence of a wrathful nemesis stalking the family. But a passerby who also called 911 reported that the scene looked like a "setup," and Alex's story quickly unravelled. While the fabrication was falling apart, the Murdaughs' law firm—known by the unfortunate acronym PMPED—disclosed that he had been pushed out of the firm a day before the incident, for allegedly misappropriating funds. In an interview on the "Today" show, Harpootlian, who was now representing Alex, declared that his client was suffering from opioid addiction, and had used a significant portion of the stolen money to buy drugs. Alex was in rehab, full of remorse and asking for prayers. And he'd revised his account of the roadside incident: he claimed that, overwhelmed by the loss of his wife and son, he'd persuaded a distant cousin who did odd jobs for him, Curtis (Eddie) Smith, to shoot him dead and make it look like murder, so that his surviving son, Buster, could collect on a ten-million-dollar life-insurance policy. Cousin Eddie had botched the job.

Alex and Eddie were promptly charged with attempted insurance fraud. But the picture soon blurred again. About two weeks after the incident, Alex showed up for a bond hearing with no sign of injury to his head. (When I asked Harpootlian about this, his response was terse: "Good hair.") In the "Today" interview, Harpootlian indicated that the suicide-exemption clause in Alex's policy had expired. There was no reason to fake a murder. Meanwhile, Eddie was denying everything. "If I'd a shot him, he'd be dead," he told reporters.

I'd been interested in the case since the murders of Paul and Maggie Murdaugh, but it was this inexplicable roadside incident which turned me into a full-on Reddit-scraping, podcast-devouring follower. Years ago, I wrote a novel in which the protagonist sets up a similar suicide-disguised-as-murder scheme for an insurance payout. I'd worried at the time that this turn was a stretch, and it had nagged at me ever since. But here was real-life vindication of my plotting, with the added twist that even the underlying suicide story appeared to be a fiction. The narrative seemed to be entering the realm of deepest noir, complete with serial fake-outs, intimations of corruption, and a true psychological puzzle at its center. Who was this jolly-looking, ruddy-cheeked attorney, smiling like Santa in one family photograph after another, his arms draped lovingly around his wife and sons?

I flew to Charleston and drove across the coastal plain to Hampton, the Murdaugh seat for a century. The terrain there is the gray-green of Corot landscapes, but flatter and drabber, with Dollar General stores and El Cheapo gas stations instead of viaducts and windmills. Hampton has seen better days, and a former Westinghouse plant stands as a poignant monument. The laminates it once manufactured were close to indestructible (they were used for bowling-alley floors), but the plant itself is in ruins.

The only other structures of any scale in town are the red brick edifices of the First Baptist Church, the law office where Alex used to work, and the county courthouse. A courthouse guard showed me the trial room, pointing out ancestral portraits of Murdaughs staring down at the jury box. I asked him what he thought of Alex. "Real nice gentleman," he said, but declined to speak further. Nearby, a county employee explained to me that some locals were too afraid of Alex to talk openly.

By now, Alex's lawyers had confirmed that their client was indeed a person of interest in the killing of his wife and son. No motive for an act of such inconceivable horror had been offered. *People* reported that Maggie had consulted a divorce lawyer weeks before the shooting, but that hardly amounted to an explanation for the slaughter. (Harpootlian has said that there is no evidence for the claim.) Online forums were full of theories, but they seemed derived more from Norse myth than from human psychology: a typical conjecture proposed that Paul had murdered his mother during an argument, then was killed by his enraged father. (Alex's attorneys declined to respond to questions about many of the allegations. He has generally denied wrongdoing and has disputed facts about his case in the media and in court.)

I was trying to avoid what Faulkner called the outsider's "eagerness to believe anything about the South not even provided it be derogatory but merely bizarre enough." In particular, I wanted to resist any idea of the ongoing saga as a tale of some purely gothic malevolence. Jack Fanning, a former environmental consultant from Charleston, suggested that an understanding of the local landscape might offer some insights—if not into the events themselves, then at least into the Murdaugh family and its peculiar position in the Lowcountry.

Fanning and I met in Hampton and drove toward the Combahee River, criss-crossing swamps where he had often fished and camped. Logging trucks plied the narrow blacktop. The scrawny logs strapped on the flatbeds, Fanning told me, were loblolly pines that had been grown for pulp—"a nasty industry." He

"Just need a minute to send a quick e-mail and then three hours to wonder if the tone was appropriate."

• • •

laid out a stark history of the region. Rice plantations, dependent on slave labor, had given way to cotton, corn, and soy—crops that depleted the soil. The land, further leached of nutrients by chemical fertilizers, was eventually too poor for much besides the loblolly pines, clusters of which stood on the flat scrub, awaiting the chainsaw. With the loss of agricultural jobs, local lawmakers struggled to attract other industries. Medical-waste disposal, tire grinding, and other grim occupations joined the logging and pulping trades.

Personal-injury lawyers also flourished, with one firm in particular profiting from the trend: PMPED. It had perfected a litigation strategy that took advantage of an unusual state provision allowing residents who had suffered an injury to sue in whatever county they chose, as long as the company had a presence there. The injury could have occurred anywhere in South Carolina. The provision was rescinded in 2005, but by then Hampton County had become a mecca for plaintiffs, with obliging juries frequently awarding multimillion-dollar verdicts in suits brought by PMPED. (A 2002 article in *Forbes* cited a medical-malpractice case that ended with a fourteen-million-dollar payout—thirteen times the national average for similar cases.) Big corporations began avoiding the area. Walmart developed plans to open a store in Hampton, but after discussions with a lawyer the idea was abandoned, according to *Forbes*. Companies that couldn't leave—such as CSX Transportation, whose railway tracks run through Hampton—often found it more convenient to settle when PMPED filed a suit against them. Better that than face a Murdaugh-friendly jury.

As this racket was explained to me, I was reminded of the Hitchcock adaptation of du Maurier's "Jamaica Inn," in which a rapacious squire and his gang plunder any vessel unwise enough to enter their remote Cornish cove. Seclusion certainly seems to have been a key element in the Murdaugh story. Bill Nettles, the U.S. Attorney in South Carolina under President Barack Obama, told me, "It's important to understand how isolated that part of the world is. It's insanely poor. And there's no industry, aside from suing people."

More jolting swerves followed the murder of Paul and Maggie, as the South Carolina Law Enforcement Division announced that it was examining two more fatalities potentially connected to the Murdaughs. The first, from 2015, involved a young nursing student, Stephen Smith, who had been found dead in the middle of a road near Hampton, with a serious head injury. Superficial appearances suggested that he'd run out of gas, begun walking home, and been accidentally hit by a vehicle. But none of the usual evidence of a hit-and-run had been found. "I saw no vehicle debris, skid marks, or injuries consistent with someone being struck by a vehicle," a highway-patrol officer at the scene reported. Days after the killing, Smith's mother told the police she'd heard that Paul and Buster Murdaugh were behind it. Officers investigated the tip, and the possibility of a hate crime emerged: Smith was gay, and his name was linked with Buster's in the gossip mill of former high-school classmates. (Buster could not be reached for comment.) But before the officers could track the rumor to its source, the pathologist in the case described Smith's death as the result of being struck by a motor vehicle—contradicting the opinions of the county coroner and at least one highway-patrol investigator. No Murdaughs were ever questioned.

The second fatality involved Gloria Satterfield, the Murdaughs' housekeeper for twenty-four years. In 2018, she died after apparently tripping on the steps outside the house at Moselle. In 2022, investigators obtained permission to exhume her body. Authorities have yet to reveal any evidence of foul play in the deaths of Smith or Satterfield. But a long-concealed insurance matter arising from Satterfield's death provided the public with a major revelation: Alex's alleged financial crimes had extended far beyond misappropriating office funds. Moreover, it appeared that some significant members of the Lowcountry's business and legal community had facilitated his deceptions for years.

Satterfield's connection to the wider story was discovered by accident. In October, 2019, a local reporter named Mandy Matney revealed that, while sifting through court documents about the Murdaughs, she'd stumbled across a wrongful-death settlement related to the housekeeper's demise. More than half a million dollars had evidently been awarded to her two sons, Tony and Brian. Tony read Matney's article and was shocked: nei-

ther he nor Brian had been told of the settlement. All they knew was that after their mother's death, the previous year, Alex had approached the family with a generous-seeming proposition: he would help them sue him over their mother's death, in order to collect a large sum from his insurance. (He had a homeowner's policy with Lloyd's.) To that end, he'd recommended a lawyer named Cory Fleming. He didn't tell them that Fleming was his close friend.

Eric Bland, a malpractice attorney whom the Satterfield brothers hired after learning of the settlement, talked me through the cold-blooded scheme behind the scheme. In the fall of 2018, Cory Fleming learned that Lloyd's would pay out in full on Alex's policy. The law required Fleming to inform the personal representative of the Satterfield estate about the settlement. At the time, the personal representative was Tony. But, for the plot to work, Tony had to be replaced by someone in Alex's pocket. Alex and Cory Fleming told him that the case was getting complicated, and that he should let a professional banker become the representative. Needless to say, they had a name to suggest.

For years, PMPED had been doing business with the Hampton-based Palmetto State Bank. The bank's chief operating officer at the time, Russell Laffitte, had accommodated—and profited from—numerous unusual financial dealings by Alex. In earlier transactions, Laffitte had played the part of the personal representative. But in this instance it was a vice-president, Chad Westendorf, who signed on. Westendorf had no experience in the role, but that was fine: his job was to know nothing and to say nothing to the Satterfield brothers about any money coming their way. (Lawyers for Laffitte and for Fleming declined to comment.)

Law firms often partner with outside organizations to craft structured settlement plans for their clients, in order to guarantee long-term income and to minimize taxes. PMPED had regularly worked with a reputable Atlanta-based insurance company called Forge Consulting. But Alex created a shadow version of the company, opening at least two "doing business as" accounts at Bank of America under the name—wait for it—Forge.

When the Lloyd's check arrived, Fleming deducted fees for himself and for Westendorf, then sent the remaining $403,500 to one of Alex's Forge accounts, apparently confident that, in the event of an investigation, he could claim that he thought he was sending the money to Forge Consulting. In all likelihood, neither he nor Alex ever believed that their actions would be challenged. It took the deus-ex-machina event of a drunken boat crash for Alex's finances to come under the scrutiny of local reporters.

Bland, the Satterfield brothers' attorney, began pressing authorities to open a criminal investigation into the settlement. While doing so, he learned that the brothers had been cheated of even more money: Alex had another liability policy, with the Nautilus Insurance Company, which had also paid out. This settlement was for $3.8 million.

"If Alex had just told the brothers he'd won them a twenty-five-thousand-dollar settlement, they'd have thought he hung the moon," Bland told me. "But he stole every cent." Alex even stood by as the bank foreclosed on the mobile home where Brian, a cognitively impaired adult, had been living on fourteen thousand dollars a year from a grocery-store job. "The scope of Murdaugh's depravity is without precedent in Western jurisprudence," a lawsuit filed by the Nautilus Insurance Company states. (Alex has denied the lawsuit's claims, but he has agreed to repay the Satterfields.) Nautilus's declaration

may be hyperbolic and self-serving, but the more one learns about Alex the less of an exaggeration it seems.

In the wake of these discoveries, South Carolina officials began looking at Alex's handling of other large insurance settlements, and a slew of similar thefts came to light, resulting in several dozen charges of financial crimes. The prosecutors' briefs give an impression of someone living in a trance of entitlement, siphoning funds from any flow of money that entered his field of awareness. Alex allegedly stole from colleagues and strangers, from the able-bodied and the injured, from the living and the dead, from the young and the old, from a white highway-patrol officer and a Black former football player. The latter, Hakeem Pinckney, was a deaf man who became quadriplegic after a car accident, then died after the ventilator at his nursing home was left unplugged. Both calamities generated insurance settlements that Alex apparently looted. Sometimes, prosecutors say, he duped clients into signing disbursement papers for outsized "expenses" against their settlements; sometimes he forged their signatures; sometimes he simply helped himself to vast sums from PMPED's Client Trust Account (which reportedly ran on an honor system).

After Mandy Matney broke the Satterfield story, Alex's bond was set at seven million dollars. He is currently awaiting trial in jail. His financial assets have been placed under the control of court-appointed receivers. In the meantime, Russell Laffitte, the former Palmetto State Bank executive, has already been tried and found guilty on multiple federal charges, including wire fraud and bank fraud. He and Cory Fleming also face multiple state indictments for fraud and conspiracy. Chad Westendorf, astonishingly, is still affiliated with Palmetto, though in February, 2022, he recorded a deposition for Bland in which he professed levels of professional ineptitude that strain belief: he claimed not to have known the meaning of the word "fiduciary," even though he was the president of the Independent Banks of South Carolina at the time. He also appeared to implicate a Hampton judge who reportedly had close ties to the Murdaughs, Carmen Mullen, in helping to keep hidden the paperwork related to the Satterfield settlement; there have been calls for a state judicial investigation into Mullen's alleged "pattern of ethically questionable conduct." (Mullen could not be reached for comment.) PMPED, which insists that it did not turn a blind eye to the activities of its miscreant partner, has repaid all the money Alex stole from its clients, and the once mighty partnership has dissolved. In all, prosecutors alleged, Alex had stolen at least eight million dollars. I asked Dick Harpootlian if he still maintained that much of this money had

gone to feed Alex's opioid habit. "That's what I said in court," he replied, carefully. "I don't know about anything else."

Alex may have been exposed as a thief, but the double homicide and the other deaths remained unresolved. In July, 2021, police released the recording of the 911 call that Alex had made after discovering his wife and son. By now, most people thought that Alex was faking the panicked voice in which he reported the murders. Carol Black, a lawyer originally from neighboring Colleton County, likened it to the scene in the movie "Fargo" in which the nefarious William H. Macy character practices reporting his wife's abduction. A novelist friend who'd lived in the area, Padgett Powell, thought that the language itself was off. "My wife and child have been shot badly," Alex says on the tape, and to Powell this phrasing sounded "archly formal and rehearsed." I took his point, though I had to wonder how a person would sound if he'd genuinely stumbled onto a scene like that. Would a more casual phrasing, or a less frantic tone, have sounded any more sincere? I was having some resistance to the thought that Alex was putting on an act in the call. The implication—that he really was involved in the murder of his wife and son—was beyond disturbing.

Alex's lawyers wouldn't give me access to him, but his cousin Eddie was out on bail, and I decided to pay him a visit. My wife, who had joined me on her way to meet relatives in Beaufort, came along. The drive took us through semi-rural subdivisions with dribs of gray Spanish moss hanging from trees and telephone poles. As we approached Eddie's sprawling yard, outside the town of Walterboro, we saw the unmistakable figure of Eddie himself, shaggy-haired and whiskery, spreading cinders on his driveway, accompanied by a muscular dog. In addition to the fraud charges, he was facing assault-and-battery charges from the roadside incident. I knew I wasn't alone in speculating that, if Alex really was involved in the killing of Paul and Maggie, Eddie was a likely candidate for the second shooter.

He looked over as we pulled in, and I waved nervously, preparing to beat a hasty retreat. But he waved back, and my wife asked if she could play with the dog. A smile lit up his weathered face. "Sure can," he said. A moment later, as she entertained the dog, I found myself in conversation with its owner.

There were no bombshells: for all his unexpected affability, Eddie was careful about what he said, and most of what he told me matched statements that he or his lawyers had already made. We started with the roadside incident. By his account, he'd thought that he was meeting up with Alex to do an odd job, only to discover that he wanted Eddie to shoot him. He'd refused, and wrested the gun from Alex. The weapon had gone off during the struggle, but Eddie was certain that no bullet had hit Alex—suggesting that Alex must have injured his head in some other way. After the scuffle, Eddie said, he had hidden the gun in a place that he intended to keep secret until his "dying day." None of this was new information, but, when I broached the topic of the double homicide, Eddie mentioned something that surprised me. He claimed that, although he'd spent a lot of time with Alex, he'd never met Maggie and barely knew her sons. (He was close enough to the family, however, to have paid his respects when Randolph Murdaugh III died, shortly after the murders.)

The meeting ended amiably, but in hindsight I suspect that Eddie didn't give me the whole picture. My best explanation of the roadside incident is that Alex asked him to create a bullet graze on his head, and that Eddie either obliged or witnessed Alex creating the graze himself. (Authorities determined that Alex's wound was superficial, though his attorneys have said that it was more serious.) Eddie then removed the gun from the scene—also at Alex's request, so that it wouldn't contradict the story of a stranger taking a potshot—and subsequently refused to disclose its whereabouts because he knew that it could get him in trouble. Eddie's apparent willingness to commit these risky acts indicates that Alex may have had some hold over him. This notion is bolstered by a recent indictment linking them in yet another alleged criminal scheme, which involved narcotics and money laundering. Whether Eddie's comments to me distancing himself from Maggie and Paul stem from this criminal alliance, or from something even darker, is an open question.

Murder charges were finally brought against Alex this past July. Though long predicted, the announcement shook me, instantly contracting the wide spectrum of possibilities to the worst imaginable reality. All talk of revenge killings, or of hit men hired to forestall divorce proceedings, now seemed moot. The indictment portrays Alex as the sole killer, acting with "malice aforethought" and wielding both weapons. No evidence was laid out, but FITSNews and other outlets were soon reporting that video from Paul's phone had revealed Alex's presence near the kennels at 8:44 P.M.—more than an hour before he called 911, and within the supposed window for both victims' times of death. (Alex's attorneys have said that the video depicts a "convivial" family.) High-velocity organic spatter had supposedly been found on the clothing that Alex was wearing that night. There were reports that he'd asked Maggie to meet him at Moselle that evening, effectively luring her there.

In terms of motive, the most plausible theory had to do with a civil suit filed by Mallory Beach's family which blamed Alex for lending Paul the boat and enabling his drinking. Shortly before the murders at Moselle, a critical hearing had been scheduled which could have compelled discovery of Alex's assets—something he'd so far managed to avoid. Given all the fraud he'd apparently been up to in the previous decade, he had reason to be seriously worried about this impending shaft of daylight on his financial affairs. Furthermore, the Beaches' attorney, Mark Tinsley, had threatened to bring suit against Paul and Maggie if Alex continued stonewalling, which could have forced them to testify under oath about the boozy culture that prevailed at Moselle. "That was where the party spot was in Hampton," a witness in the Stephen Smith case told an investigator. "A lot of fights, alcohol, drugs." According to a deposition, beer was kept in a walk-in deer cooler, and underage kids were free to help themselves. Photographs of Paul that have entered pub-

lic circulation suggest that his parents were comfortable seeing their son staggering around blotto.

"Paul and Maggie were how I was keeping Alex honest," Tinsley told me. Unfortunately—so the theory went—the threat gave Alex a powerful incentive to get rid of them. This not only would prevent their testimony but could potentially undermine the whole suit. After all, a jury would be unlikely to award a large settlement against a man whose wife and son had just been gunned down. And with the boat crash supplying a motive for someone else to have killed them, Alex would perhaps be viewed as a victim rather than as a suspect—especially if he further deflected suspicion by using more than one weapon.

The theory had an icy logic: kill Paul and Maggie, save self and money. And the vigilante-justice scenario was consistent with his staging of the roadside incident, three months later. Moreover, PMPED first inquired about mislaid funds on the very day of the killings, which could have compounded Alex's feeling of being under tremendous pressure. Yet this explanation again hinged on the idea of a man plotting the death of his own son, and I still couldn't get my head around that. Paul was certainly a handful. "Holy terror" was about the kindest epithet I heard from people who'd known him—most descriptions evoked a teen-age Caligula. But it's surely a long way from there to the planned execution of one's child.

A hearing was set for July, at the Colleton County Courthouse, in Walterboro. I flew to Charleston and drove across the now familiar landscape. I can't pretend that I was growing fond of it, exactly, but I'd begun to see how you might get attached to its stubborn plainness—the spent farmland, with its mounds of logging debris; the flat churches, with their thumbtack spires; the double-wides surrounded by chain-link fences; the pervasive sense of life stripped to its most elemental options, as laid out by the highway billboards: "Serve the Poor Like Jesus," "Win Settlement!"

TV crews were setting up outside the courthouse when I arrived. Inside, the press was seated in the jury box. Media coverage of the case had grown significantly with every twist. Most of the journalists I'd talked to were appearing on programs produced by the major streaming services, as were some of the lawyers. The national attention was hardly surprising, given the lurid nature of the case. More so was the degree to which pressure from local news outlets had been responsible for breaking the story. Without reporters like John Monk, of the *State* newspaper; Mandy Matney, who started a podcast about the murders; or Will Folks, the founder of FITSNews, the full extent of Alex's schemes might never have come to light.

Dick Harpootlian entered the courtroom with his team. Silver-haired and puffy-eyed, he looked simultaneously overworked and primed for action. I'd asked him once about his dual career as lawmaker and trial lawyer. "Lincoln was a very active and aggressive litigator while he was a legislator," he told me. The exalted comparison may be explained by the company he keeps. Harpootlian, a former chair of the state Democratic Party, has talked of playing golf with President Joe Biden, and his wife was recently made U.S. Ambassador to Slovenia. Eric Bland, the Satterfield brothers' attorney, told me that Harpootlian is "probably the most powerful person in this state," adding, "Meanwhile, Alan Wilson"—the attorney general of South Carolina—"is a Trumpster who's been sued by Harpootlian over masks and so on. That's why there are so many charges. Wilson wants Harpootlian publicly shamed. This is blood sport."

A door opened, and Alex was brought in. It was the first time I'd seen him in person. Connor Cook's lawyer, Joe McCulloch, had told me, "You could drop Alex in any town in the South and he'd get along, because he's a beefy good ol' boy." Photographs of him in hunting camo seemed in keeping with this description. But there was nothing beefy about the tall figure being led past the jury box. Carrying himself very upright, in a loose white shirt, slim-fitting khakis, and tan loafers, with a pair of glasses perched suavely atop his head, he looked lean and sleek and surprisingly put-together. Were it not for the shackles at his wrists and ankles, he might have been walking onto a yacht.

Standing for the formal arraignment, he pleaded not guilty. In response to the prosecutor's old-fashioned formulation—"How shall you be tried?"—he offered the traditional rejoinder, "By God and my country," momentarily giving a strange impression of collegiality between them. A portrait of his grandfather, Randolph (Buster) Murdaugh, Jr., hung at the back of the court. (The portrait has been taken down for the trial.) Buster was a notorious reprobate who was linked to an illicit liquor ring. His father, Randolph, Sr., died in what

"O.K., so this must be the ingredients."

some suspect was a suicide made to look like an accident, staged with the intent of enriching his heirs. Nobody knows what caused his car to stall on railway tracks and get hit by a train one night, but he was in poor health, and his son certainly wasted no time in suing the rail company. Ancestral echoes seem to haunt the family.

There'd been speculation that prosecutors would reveal some of their evidence at the hearing, but Harpootlian opposed discussion of the fateful night at Moselle—"We're trying to get a fair trial for our clients, not a trial in the media," he said—and nothing new emerged. Since then, however, he and his legal partner, Jim Griffin, have in fact been making concerted use of the media to prepare the ground for their defense. In one motion, they signalled an intent to sow reasonable doubt about what will almost certainly be a purely circumstantial case—and to present an entirely different murder story of their own. Among other things, they have claimed that, this past May, Cousin Eddie failed a polygraph test in which he was asked if he was present at the killings or knew anything about them. The prosecution has said that Alex's legal team has misrepresented the test results, but, as with Connor Cook, the Murdaugh team appears to have identified a plausible fall guy. (Eddie has denied all wrongdoing.)

They won't have to prove anything, of course, only insinuate, but there is material that could put cracks in the prosecution's case. In June, the narcotics and money-laundering charges were announced. The indictment is short on detail, but it sketches the outline of a scheme in which Alex was allegedly funnelling money into the narcotics trade, with Eddie as his middleman. Harpootlian, far from ridiculing the idea of trafficking drugs as a way of laundering money, appears to have embraced the notion as part of his strategy of defending Alex from the murder charges. In a recent filing, he claimed that Eddie regularly dropped off drugs for Alex by the Moselle kennels—implying that Eddie may have shot Maggie and Paul when, say, they chanced upon him making a delivery.

To convict Alex, the prosecutors will have to offer their own explanation of what happened that night, and it will need to be compelling enough to persuade all twelve jurors that a father who had been demonstrably protective of his wayward son could be capable of shooting him point-blank, twice, with a shotgun, essentially just to buy himself some time. Clearly, in protecting Paul after the boat crash, Alex was also attempting to protect himself. But the prosecutors may need something stronger than a pragmatically mixed motive, stronger even than his serial frauds and betrayals, to make him out as the irredeemably evil monster that they need him to be.

The trial begins on January 23rd. One side will tell a more convincing story than the other, but a definitive account of those moments in the darkness at Moselle is unlikely to emerge, as is any complete answer to the question of how Alex became enmeshed in his alleged crimes in the first place. The explanation currently being floated by the attorney general's office is that the thefts were in effect a string of Ponzi-like debt repayments, each covering its predecessor, originating with a series of bad land deals. Alex, prosecutors suggest, was likely motivated by vanity: he was a hereditary big shot who couldn't face being seen as a failure. It sounds believable, if hard to prove, but perhaps more important to understand than Alex's pathology is why there was so little in place—socially, institutionally, legally—to keep his predatory impulses in check.

Several people I spoke with alluded to a persistence of antiquated class structures within South Carolina's social fabric. Bill Nettles, the former U.S. Attorney, told me, "For multiple generations, you have had a modern-day caste system. A lot of these people were born on third base in an area where they could simply do no wrong." The South Carolina writer Juliana Staveley-O'Carroll spoke of an entrenched "pyramidal class system" in the state, which she attributed to its history as a royal province. Will Folks, who worked for South Carolina's former Republican governor Mark Sanford before founding FITSNews, also drew a connection between the state's early history and the Murdaugh case. South Carolina, he told me, "has an incredibly corrupt ruling class, and the Murdaughs were part of it." As Folks saw it, the system of selecting judges was largely to blame. "The judicial branch has become an extension of the political branch," he said. "We need to have judges chosen by people who don't control their salaries, don't set their office budgets, don't decide on their futures."

It's easy to see how a person like Alex Murdaugh could benefit from a system enabling well-connected lawbreakers to hire amenable lawmakers to represent them in front of handpicked judges. A presumption of impunity was likely part of his operating calculus. Even Senator Harpootlian acknowledged that the system of selecting judges was flawed. "There's probably a better way to do it," he told me. "But no perfect way. You've just got to count on people being honorable."

Lending weight to Folks's corruption argument are the bleak findings of a recent investigation by the Myrtle Beach *Sun News* reporter David Weissman into South Carolina's so-called factoring business, which allows companies to target the structured settlements awarded to accident victims. As things stand, factoring companies can offer cash up front to victims in exchange for part or all of their settlements, at an average rate of twenty-five cents on the dollar. In one case, judges allowed companies to buy a young woman's entire settlement in a series of deals, culminating in the purchase of her remaining tranche for about ten cents on the dollar. The woman had suffered brain damage in a train collision at the age of twelve, and the settlement was intended to support her for the rest of her life. In Weissman's article, a retired judge dryly underscored the state's tolerance of such practices by saying, "We're all entitled to make stupid mistakes."

It's no surprise that Alex Murdaugh's alleged schemes flourished in this kind of atmosphere. You have to wonder if he and his accomplices even thought they were doing anything particularly wrong. Mallory Beach's tragic end opened a window into the self-dealing that pervades the Lowcountry's oligarchy. One hopes that her death will also spur demands for change in the political structures that facilitate this culture. As Folks said, quoting an Elizabethan witticism to illustrate the degrading effect of the graft and cronyism afflicting South Carolina, "Treason doth never prosper: what's the reason?/Why, if it prosper, none dare call it treason." ♦

LIFE IS TOO SHORT

BY CORA FRAZIER

Life is short. Why not spend it mired in regret? Why not spend your evenings sitting side by side at the dining-room table with your spouse, trying to determine whether your downstairs neighbors' ceiling fan is making the floor tremble?

Our existence on this planet is statistically insignificant when compared with the history of the universe. So take advantage of it! Charge your spouse six dollars and fifty cents on Venmo for "supplemental groceries."

You get to *choose* the life you live. And, every minute, you have the opportunity to make a different choice. Every minute, you could say, "Today, I will eat defrosted turnip soup and think about the time I felt left out at my friend's wedding."

What you really want to do right now is call an office-supply store's customer-service number. So why not *do* that? What's holding you back? Who would you be if you stopped limiting yourself and really *let yourself experience* the hold music, interrupted every twenty-three seconds with "All representatives are currently assisting other callers"?

The next time you find yourself adding up items in your "worst-case scenario" budget, close your eyes and really *feel* your fingers on the laptop keyboard with its "N" partly worn off. Sense the gentle thrum of panic in your chest, and hear the patter of the drill in the street beyond. Open your eyes and subtract another thousand. Why? Because you, my friend, deserve it.

True, you could dedicate your time on earth to your relationships and the work and hobbies that give you a sense of purpose. Or you could dedicate your time to washing used ziplock bags and turning them inside out on drying racks to dry.

Someone's got to read every single tweet written by peers who have achieved success in industries that you were never interested in, so why not *you*? Give yourself permission to take screenshots of other people's life joy and text the images to acquaintances with the caption "LOL."

There are only twenty-four hours in a day, so why not say "Fuck it" and fully embrace all the sublimity of your scarcity mind-set? Why not return seventy per cent of what you buy out of fear that you'll never be able to retire? You do you! You *walk* into that retailer and request a refund outside of the return window like the transcendent being you truly are!

You are a gorgeous human with unlimited potential to eat week-old hard-boiled eggs, and the only person who's holding you back from checking eighteen times to see if the stove is off is *you*.

Every moment that you're not sitting double-parked in your Honda Civic, protecting your spot during street cleaning, is a moment wasted. Every moment that you're bounding through autumn leaves with your rescue puppy is a moment that you *could* be writing a negative review of a printer you broke. Every moment that you're meditating is a moment that you could be thinking of comebacks to the student who called your class "lower level." This very afternoon, you *could* stroll down the street as you talk to your friend on the phone, listening to each of his words, or you could put yourself on mute and clean the toilet.

Your heart's truest desire is to refuse to rejoin the family thread because you can't handle your grandmother anymore. Of course, there's the voice in your head telling you that you "should" forgive her for suggesting that you brush your hair more often. But forget "should"s! Focus on reading marketing e-mails instead, out of a sense of guilt! Because you have a unique and beautiful simmering rage inside you, and no one else can harbor it for you.

And, if you *do* enjoy your time working in public defense, or knitting, or cooking recipes from around the world, or reading out loud to your spouse, well . . . honestly, that seems like something you should examine.

And, whenever you decide that you want to live your life in all its exquisite smallness, we'll be here for you with our arms firmly at our sides. ♦

LUCI GUTIÉRREZ

ANNALS OF INNOVATION

BUILD BETTER

Can 3-D printing help solve the housing crisis?

BY RACHEL MONROE

Before Jason Ballard became an entrepreneur, he considered becoming a priest. His speech is still peppered with the idiom of faith—*wicked*, *angels*, *sacred*—and, when he latches on to a subject he cares about, he assumes a rousing, propulsive cadence. These days, the topic he is most evangelical about is our broken housing system. "What we're doing is not working," Ballard told me last spring. "There are far too many homeless people. Working-class people can't afford basic housing in regular old American cities. Construction's too wasteful. Houses aren't energy-efficient enough. At the suburb scale, it's dystopian, almost, what we're getting, right? We're supposed to be the most advanced version of humanity that's ever existed and we can't even meet this basic need properly. And that means the housing of our future can't—not *shouldn't*, but *can't*—be like the housing we have now."

In 2017, Ballard co-founded Icon, a construction startup focussed on what he believes to be a solution to the housing crisis: 3-D-printed construction, a largely automated method that creates buildings layer by layer, typically with cement-based material. The company has offices in the Yard, a mixed-use development in a formerly industrial area of Austin, Texas. The Yard is currently home to a sake company, a winery, a brewery, a canned-cocktail company, a hard-seltzer manufacturer, a whiskey distillery, and a Tesla dealership. On the morning I visited, the air was thick with the sweet-sour smell of fermentation.

Amid supply-chain issues, labor shortages, and the rising cost of construction materials, there has been a surge of interest in novel ways of building, and Icon has grown accordingly. Five years ago, fewer than ten people worked at the company; now it employs more than four hundred. Ballard, who is forty and has bright eyes and a guileless, open face, met me in a narrow conference room. Placards on the wall read "Courage," "Ambition," and "Velocity." He wore a black Patagonia jacket embroidered with the company's name and, as he often does, a white cowboy hat.

So far, 3-D-printed construction has generated more headlines than buildings. In the past few years, companies have announced the first 3-D-printed house in Florida, "the first two story house printed on site in Europe," and the first market-rate 3-D-printed house sold in the United States. Until last year, Icon, one of the biggest and best-funded companies in the field, had printed fewer than two dozen houses, most of them essentially test cases. But, when I met Ballard, the company had recently announced a partnership with Lennar, the second-largest home-builder in the United States, to print a hundred houses in a development outside Austin. A lot was riding on the project, which would be a test of whether the technology was ready for the mainstream. "We almost won't get out of bed for less than a hundred homes anymore," Ballard told me. "This is a problem at scale, and so we need to be working at scale."

In Austin, where the median rent has risen forty-five per cent in the past year, the tech industry is usually considered a driver of the housing crisis, rather than its solution. "In short order, like Silicon Valley, it could result in people having to make career decisions and say, 'I can't live there, I can't afford it,'" Henry Cisneros, a former Secretary of Housing and Urban Development and mayor of San Antonio, said at a panel on housing affordability at South by Southwest last year. The next day, Ballard, one of the conference's featured speakers, made a more techno-utopian pitch. "What if we could build houses that work twice as good in half the time at half the price? What kind of problems could we solve? What kind of op-

Using a concrete blend, a printer can create the shell of a simple building in twenty-four hours, given optimal conditions.

ILLUSTRATION BY SEAN DONG

portunities would open up before us?" he asked. "Humans are amazing, life is a miracle, and we can do this."

When I heard that you could 3-D-print a building, I imagined something akin to a "Star Trek" replicator—a machine that would whir briefly and then spit out a fully formed house. The actual process is messier and more laborious, and, at the moment, it is largely used to construct walls, while conventional methods are used for foundations, floors, roofs, and finishes. But walls are among the most costly and labor-intensive aspects of home-building, and, in the majority of newly built U.S. homes, they're likely to be made out of drywall panels mounted on wooden frames. Though drywall is easy to produce and relatively inexpensive, it takes a while to install, is not particularly sturdy, and is susceptible to mold. 3-D-printing advocates argue that rethinking our walls is a step toward building cheaper, more resilient houses.

Before my visit to the Yard, I spent an afternoon watching printers in action on YouTube. The videos are hypnotically pleasurable, providing the lulling satisfaction of seeing a machine do its job perfectly. A nozzle sweeps back and forth, extruding a concrete-like substance in ascending inch-thick layers, following a blueprint fed to it by a software system. A printer can create the shell of a simple building in as little as twenty-four hours, although real-world conditions (rain, cold temperatures, operator error) slow the process. In the past two years, as Icon has expanded, its fleet of printers, called Vulcans, has printed military barracks, disaster-resilient houses, a luxury residence, and, at the Johnson Space Center, in Houston, a full-sized simulation of a Martian habitat, for NASA. Other 3-D-printing companies have produced an apartment building, a houseboat in the Czech Republic, and a house for Habitat for Humanity. Dubai has pledged that, by 2030, a quarter of its new construction will be printed.

At the Yard, two employees kept watch as a Vulcan moved along a track, its nozzle depositing lines of gray LavaCrete, Icon's proprietary cement mixture. It had the texture of gritty toothpaste and smelled like cookie batter. The Vulcan was attached, via a thick hose, to Magma, a sophisticated version of a cement mixer, which blends LavaCrete and various additives. In the traditional construction world, concrete is considered a material with a high tolerance for imprecision, but in 3-D printing it must be liquid enough to move smoothly through the printer but then solidify rapidly, in order to receive the next layer by the time the printer head returns. The Magma's software takes weather measurements (temperature, pressure, humidity) every fifteen minutes and adjusts the mixture—adding a superplasticizer if it's cold, or a retarder if it's hot. Ballard pointed out the Vulcan that had printed the Martian habitat; it was back at the factory to be serviced. "That's also the one that printed the house you're going to stay in tonight," he said.

Ballard speaks quickly and with such bright conviction that I left my conversations with him briefly convinced that the world was full of untapped potential. He grew up in Orange, the easternmost city in Texas, a humid, hurricane-battered place on the border of Louisiana. "You could throw a football from my front yard into the Gulf of Mexico," he told me. "Except it's like a swamp right there, not a beach." The Gulf Coast was thrillingly biodiverse, populated by flying squirrels, roseate spoonbills, and alligator gar. It was also crowded with petrochemical plants. "There are signs all over town, like, 'Do not eat the fish in this water,'" Ballard said. "Seeing the desecration—it just makes you ask bigger questions than the typical eighth grader is asking." In 2006, he became the first person in his immediate family to graduate from college, earning a degree in conservation biology from Texas A. & M. Two years later, Hurricane Ike flooded his childhood home with six feet of water. Ballard spent weeks ripping sodden drywall and insulation from the damaged structure. "And, sure enough, they rebuilt it with drywall," he said. Nine years later, floods from Hurricane Harvey damaged eighty-five per cent of the homes in Orange, according to the mayor. Ballard's parents, defeated, moved inland. The experience left Ballard with a strong dislike for drywall, a material that he sometimes seems to take as a personal affront. "If I offered a one-million-dollar prize to people in this room to invent a less resilient, less durable, less healthy, less sustainable material than drywall, nobody would win the prize," he said at his South by Southwest talk. "We literally can't think of a way to do it worse."

After college, Ballard and his now wife, Jenny, moved to Boulder, Colorado, where he took a job at a homeless shelter and got to know some people who worked in sustainable construction. His new friends preached about the evils of standard building methods—how much energy they consume, how much landfill waste is produced. "I was, like, Jesus, I don't need to be a field biologist, I need to be working in *buildings*," Ballard said. He and Jenny moved to Austin to run TreeHouse, a sustainable-building-supply company he co-founded with a college friend, Evan Loomis. TreeHouse positioned itself as a green alternative to Home Depot, selling pure-wool carpets, smart thermostats, and cabinets made from sustainable lumber. In a hippie town just starting to swell with tech money, the company proved popular. But within a few years Ballard came to believe that the kinds of building intervention he was selling were not sufficiently transformative. "It was all accepting the current paradigm—this is the way we're going to build houses, let's just make them a little better," he said.

One day, Ballard told Jenny that his heart wasn't in TreeHouse anymore. " 'Guilt' isn't the right word," he told me. "But I'm losing faith that the world will be different because of this business. Something much more radical has to happen."

After the Second World War, the housing market was unable to keep up with the demand produced by returning soldiers and their new families, a situation so extreme that President Truman appointed an official housing expediter. Subsidized by federal funding, entrepreneurs experimented with new ways to mass-produce houses. It was a boom time for visionaries, who dreamed of new forms, new materials, new ways of living.

Buckminster Fuller had once copied a pronouncement by Le Corbusier into his journal: "The problem of the house has not yet been stated." After

Fuller's first foray into industrialized construction, the Dymaxion House, failed, he turned to a new form, the geodesic dome. Carl Strandlund, a Midwestern inventor, claimed that his Lustron homes, one-story houses made of prefabricated enamelled-steel panels, weren't just an improvement on existing structures but "a new way of life." Around the same time, an entrepreneur named William Levitt applied the principles of the assembly line to homebuilding, first on Long Island and later in Pennsylvania. Relying in large part on drywall for its construction, a standard tract house in Levittown cost a little less than eight thousand dollars, the equivalent of about a hundred thousand dollars today. (The promise of accessible homeownership was not open to everyone. Robert Mereday, whose company delivered drywall to Levittown, didn't even bother to put in an application on one of the new houses. "It was generally known that Black people couldn't buy into the development," his son later recalled. "When you grow up and live in a place, you know what the rules are.")

Strandlund eventually filed for bankruptcy, and Fuller never managed to mass-produce residential domes, but Levitt's influence on the built environment persists. Today, new-home construction is dominated by production builders who, like Levitt, buy tracts of land and erect houses by the thousands, keeping costs low by building at scale. Prioritizing operational efficiencies, Ballard believes, has led to what he calls the housing "doom loop": "When you use lower-quality materials, and lower-quality labor, and you recycle designs, and you make the lots smaller, the outcome isn't that nice. Then cities respond by layering on a bunch of new regulations. And then the builders have to cut even more corners. That means the quality of the homes goes down again. And now the city comes back with more regulation. And this is the doom loop that's gotten us to where we are today."

When I put Ballard's doom-loop theory to Jenny Schuetz, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution who specializes in housing policy, she pointed out that our political system is structured such that current residents can, and often do, stymie efforts to build more housing. "People don't want more neighbors, more traffic, and more congestion on the roads, more kids in schools," she said. "And, when you get into multifamily housing, there's a lot of pushback against renters, often via not very thinly veiled racist and classist remarks about the kinds of people who rent homes." She also noted that the construction industry never fully recovered from the 2008 recession: fewer new homes were built in the U.S. in the following ten years than in any decade since the nineteen-sixties, even as the population continued to grow. According to the Federal National Mortgage Association, the U.S. is short some four million housing units, a deficit that's worse for low-income households.

In 2016, while Ballard was still working at TreeHouse, he began meeting with friends to talk about alternative construction methods: ZIP panels, SIP panels, shipping-container houses, prefab houses, houses grown out of fungus. 3-D printing quickly emerged as the most alluring option. It used technology to automate and speed up building, but it also allowed much more design freedom than techniques that relied on prefabricated materials. A printer could erect thick walls with relative ease, and that made the resulting buildings more energy-efficient and structurally sound. Concrete wasn't particularly vulnerable to mold, and the printing process created much less waste than standard building did. Although making concrete is carbon-intensive—cement manufacturing is responsible for some eight per cent of global CO_2 emissions—Ballard came to believe that it was his best option. "If you replace all that concrete with lumber, replace it with plastics, it's much more ecologically devastating," he said. "Wood is lovely, but it's a conductor of heat, so you spend all this money and time insulating it," he went on. "It wants to rot, it wants to catch fire, it wants to be termite food. There are a lot of first-principles reasons that, if an alien showed up and you asked it what would be the better building material, the concrete or the wood, it's for sure the concrete. We've got bridges that stand in salt water for a hundred years—they're made of concrete. We've got concrete domes in Rome that have been there for a thousand years."

The idea of "printing" a building with concrete originated with Behrokh Khoshnevis, an engineering professor at the University of Southern California. In the nineteen-nineties and early two-thousands, Khoshnevis, an early proponent of small-scale 3-D printing with plastics and metals, began experimenting with using the technology to make much bigger objects—industrial parts, at first, and then, eventually, buildings. His printer consisted of a nozzle attached to a movable gantry crane. The work was dirtier and more difficult than many of his graduate students liked, but Khoshnevis came to believe that the technology had the possibility to transform the world. In 2012, he gave a talk at a TEDx conference in Medellín, Colombia. "Anybody who has built a house knows the problem with the construction process. The solution is nothing other than automation," he said. "We're talking about the technology that can build custom-designed homes onsite, entirely by the machine, in one day." Two years later, he printed the shell of a prototype house in less than twenty-four hours, an event that was widely covered by the media.

Ballard, intrigued by the potential of 3-D printing, reached out to Andrew Logan, a college friend who was working as an architect in Austin. "I was the first available person he knew that might be interested in drawing something harebrained," Logan told me. "There wasn't a grand ambition that there was going to be a business behind this. It was just, like, 'Let's see if we can 3-D-print a building. Let's see if we can pull this off.'"

Their first attempt took place in a friend's back yard, on Chicon Street in East Austin, in 2018. Ballard and some friends churned batches of concrete in a standing mixer, then poured them into a prototype printer with a bucket. When the mixture started to clog, Ballard's wife, Jenny, suggested using a window screen to sift the clumps. The three-hundred-and-fifty-square-foot structure was completed hours before South by Southwest's opening day. An article

reported that the house had been printed in a day, at a cost of four thousand dollars. It had taken more time and money to complete the structure—that figure applied only to the wall system—but news of the cheap, fast house circulated widely. "We kind of won South By that year," Ballard said. "It just caught fire. And that unfortunate headline about the four-thousand-dollar houses probably helped us catch fire." Icon, which he founded with Loomis and Alex Le Roux, did its seed round of funding later that year. Ballard began to talk about printing homes by the hundreds, then the thousands, then the millions; he'd finally found a project appropriately sized to his ambitions. Four years after the Chicon-house experiment, Icon was valued at nearly two billion dollars.

Ballard's grand statements about the future of 3-D printing haven't endeared him to everyone in the industry. Philip Lund-Nielsen is a co-founder of COBOD International, a 3-D-printing construction company headquartered in Copenhagen. "Let me just put it this way," he said. "There's a lot of U.S. companies that are very, very ambitious, or optimistic, in their marketing materials." Too much hype can be harmful in the long term, Lund-Nielsen said: "You just blow up the potential where the expectations don't meet the reality of the technology." He told me it's "very likely" that 3-D-printed construction will eventually be a significantly more efficient way to build. "But maybe a few years down the line," he said. When I posed this criticism to Ballard, he scoffed. "I haven't even started raising expectations," he said. "They're going to be terrified of what we're about to do."

Eric Feder, the president of LenX, Lennar's innovation arm, told me that his job involves anticipating disruption: if the production builders were Blockbuster, then who was Netflix? In 2019, Feder travelled to Austin to meet with Ballard, who made a strong first impression—cowboy boots, cowboy hat, sophisticated understanding of materials science. Feder came away from the meeting convinced that Ballard had the kind of founder vibe—a charisma rooted in relentless energy—that, though familiar in Silicon Valley, was uncommon in the construction industry. He compared Icon to Tesla, and Ballard to Elon Musk. "What they're doing doesn't appeal to everyone," he said. "But it's new and cool and sexy. And there's a massive addressable market. You can't help but say to yourself, 'Wow.'"

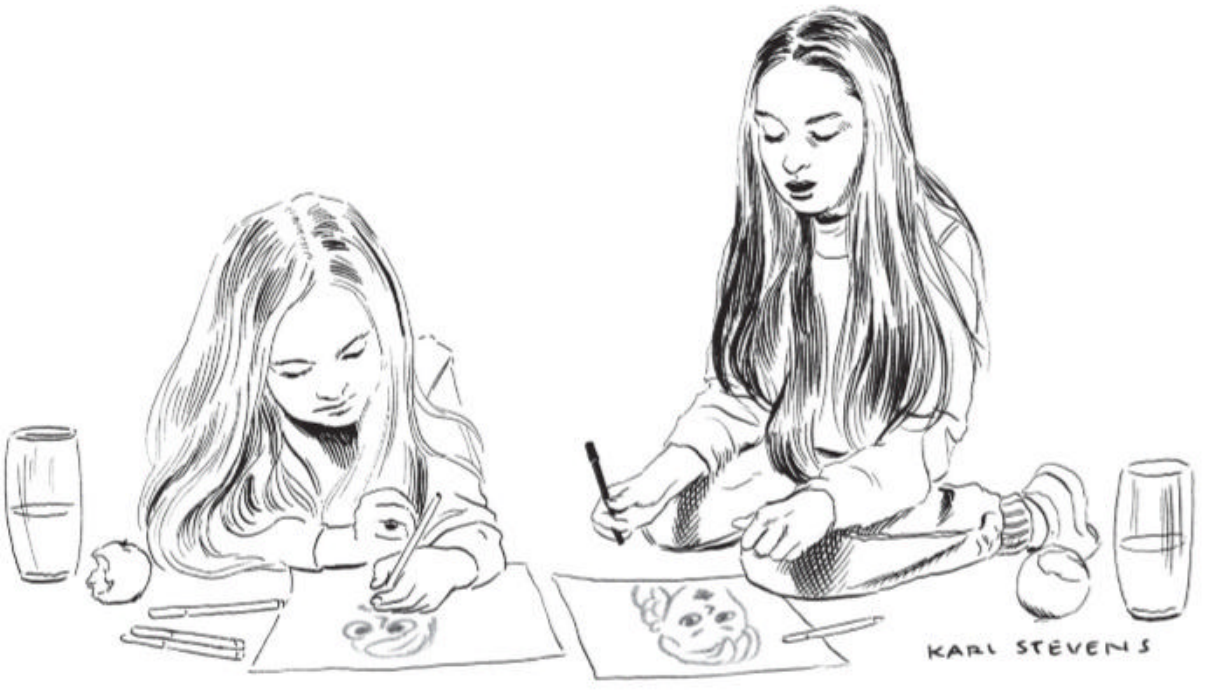
Stuart Miller, Lennar's executive chairman, told me that he was initially "somewhat dismissive" of 3-D-printed construction. "Innovation is an expensive exercise with unproven returns," he said. "Look, we go to work every day, we make sure the trains run on time, we build our business with the known methods, the known programs, the known economics." But, by the fall of 2020, the known economics weren't working as well as they used to. The supply-chain crunch was at its worst, and Lennar was having trouble finding adequate supplies of lumber and engineered wood. In Austin, which became the country's second-fastest-growing city during the pandemic, the problems were particularly acute. The median home price rose a hundred thousand dollars between 2020 and 2021, and Lennar struggled to build enough houses to meet the demand. The two companies agreed to what was for Lennar a small experiment and for Icon a high-stakes chance to prove itself: printing a hundred houses, an entire suburban neighborhood.

Ballard believed that one reason previous attempts to commercialize 3-D-printed construction had failed was a lack of attention to aesthetics. He got frustrated when he saw 3-D-printed houses that looked just like their traditionally built equivalents. It was as easy to print a curved line as a straight one, so why force the material into right angles? He liked to scroll through the sinuous imaginary structures people made using such A.I. art programs as Dall-E and Midjourney. "The world doesn't want boxes," he told me. "That's not what's in the human heart."

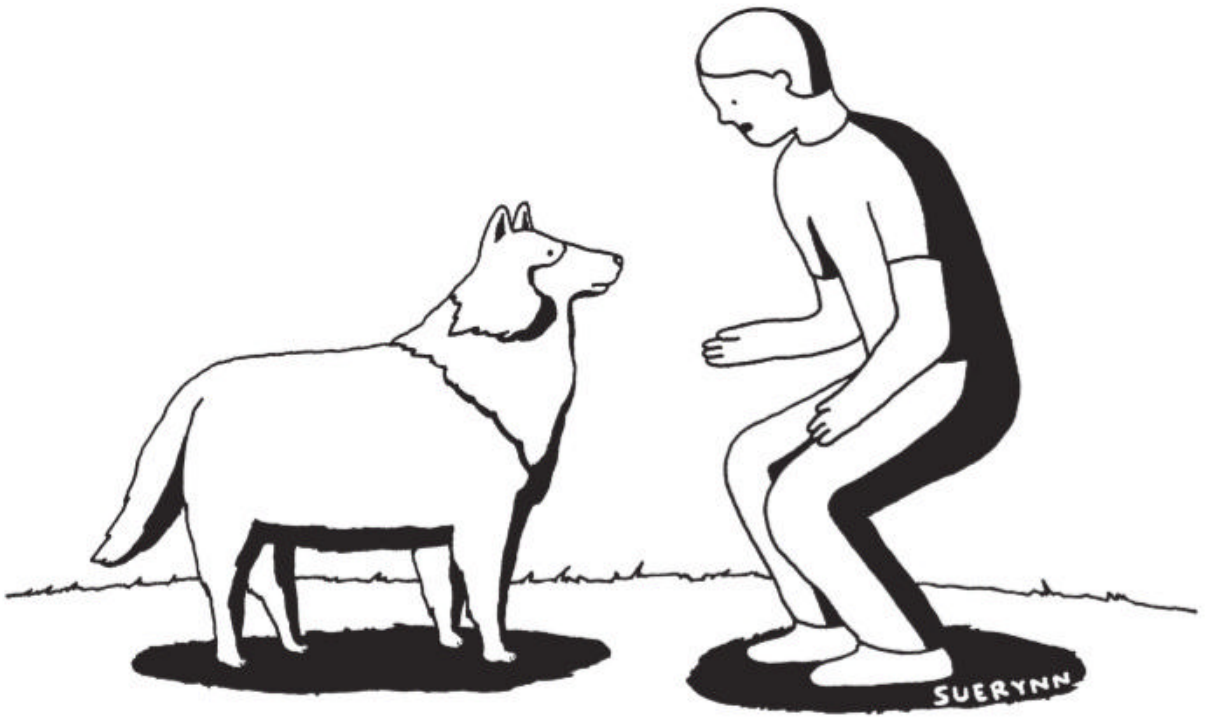
In 2019, the Danish architect Bjarke Ingels, who was speaking at South by Southwest, saw the Chicon house and arranged a meeting with Ballard. The two men hit it off right away. "His cowboy hat! And his Texas accent!" Ingels recalled. Ingels's outsized tendencies aligned with Ballard's. "I love Darwin's idea of evolution so much that I called my son Darwin," Ingels said. "And Jason called his twins Apollo and Artemis."

Ingels played around with designing a house that could be entirely printed, including the roof. "You get forms that look incredibly fresh," he told me. "These mixes of squares and domes, these 'squomes.'" They reminded him of the domed houses of Puglia, in Italy, which are built out of limestone boulders, and of Luke Skywalker's hut on Tatooine, but they also looked entirely themselves. Ingels's firm, Bjarke Ingels Group, signed on to design the houses Icon was building for Lennar.

Icon's first foray into the expressive potential of 3-D-printed architecture



"No, mine is an appropriation of the Disney-princess imagery as a critique of the hegemonic corporate paradigm of femininity. Yours is just Elsa."



"What's that, girl? Timmy's trapped in a boring work function and he can't get out?"

• • •

was House Zero, a two-thousand-square-foot luxury home designed by the Texas architects Lake Flato. I met Ballard at the house last February, shortly after it was completed. Ballard had asked Lake Flato to design a structure that would show off the distinctive potential of printed architecture. The hallways were undulating and the rooms had curved edges. The ribbed concrete walls were left unpainted. There is not a square inch of drywall in the entire structure. "That costs money," Ballard admitted. "But this house is designed to make a point, and part of that point is psychological. You're so used to *having* to have Sheetrock, to *having* to have straight walls."

I was one of the first people to spend the night in House Zero, and the Icon team seemed slightly reluctant to release the place into my care. "Let us know if there are any issues at all," a P.R. representative said twice. After they left, I sat alone in the nearly circular dining room. I had expected a 3-D-printed house to have the industrial precision of an architectural rendering come to life, but the effect was unexpectedly cozy, something like being inside a coil pot. I thought of what Logan, the architect, had described as the "wabi-sabi" character of a printed wall. "It's not an iPhone, with a one-sixteenth level of detail," he said. "From, like, a construction-honesty standpoint, it's cool. You understand what you're inhabiting. With drywall, you're just looking at a smooth surface that tells you nothing about how it was actually assembled, versus a plaster wall, where you see how the workman's hands rubbed in a circular pattern. You get the same thing with 3-D printing, it's just that a robot did it."

Tim Shea is the first person in the U.S. to live full time in a 3-D-printed house, which Icon built in 2019, on the outskirts of Austin, as part of the Community First! Village, a master-planned neighborhood of tiny homes for formerly homeless people. I visited him there on a frigid day. The concrete walls were painted white, and a cat drowsed on the bed. "I keep the room hotter than I like it, just because I worry she's going to be cold," Shea said.

Shea, who is in his seventies, told me that he'd become addicted to heroin as a young man. "I took little breaks—I got married, had a couple kids, worked for G.M. and some straight places like that, but I never got it out of my system," he said. Over the years, he was arrested a handful of times on drug charges. By the time he was in his early sixties, he was clean, but his arthritis was so bad that he had both knees replaced and could no longer handle a job involving manual labor. He spent years living in rooming houses, but, as property values in Austin crept upward, those arrangements were growing difficult to find. Between rising rents and his criminal record, he told me, "there was just nowhere clean and decent to live." He began sleeping in parking lots, and life on the streets compounded his problems. "When you're just walking and walking and walking all day, and it's a hundred degrees out, you start getting delusional," he said.

Tiny-home compounds like Shea's—which was a project of the nonprofit Mobile Loaves & Fishes—have cropped up all over the country, in an attempt to address the growing issue of homelessness. (In 2019, the Austin City Council removed a long-standing ban on public camping in an attempt to decriminalize homelessness; two years later, the city's voters elected to reinstate it.) Icon has also printed houses in Mexico for New Story, a nonprofit combatting homelessness. But the need is too large to be addressed by nonprofits alone. "There's not enough philanthropy in the world," Sarah Lee, New Story's chief operating officer, told me. "You've got to get developers incentivized to go down-market, to do it in a way that's responsible." But Schuetz, of the Brookings Institution, is skeptical that new technologies will get us there. "People are trying to come up with technical fixes to what is fundamentally a political problem. There are a lot of deep-seated reasons why people oppose housing well before you get to, How are we going to physically construct this thing? And there's no technology that's going to fix the politics."

Ballard has talked about 3-D-printed construction offering "a quantum leap in affordability." So far, though, the savings have not been so dramatic. Icon estimates that House Zero cost at least ten per cent less than it would have if it had been built conventionally. The houses that Icon printed for New Story were "on the more expensive end," Lee said, although the process was much faster than other building methods the nonprofit has used—"easily half the time." Design elements that tend to drive up costs—thick walls, curved edges, floor-to-ceiling windows—can be cheaper to build with 3-D printing. But other relatively straightforward tasks,

such as installing a standard window, can be surprisingly pricey. "You're having to buy this product off the shelf that was designed to fit into wood and kind of jerry-rig it into concrete," Ballard said. As yet, 3-D-printed construction is mostly used to create single-family structures, not the more dense housing that most experts say we'll need to address the gap in supply.

The path that Ballard proposes to take to improve the supply and affordability of housing is circuitous. "It's funny," he told me. "It might just turn out that some of the answers to our problems on Earth are on the moon."

My trip to Icon's headquarters happened to coincide with a visit by a team from NASA. Ballard introduced me to one of the visiting scientists, a woman with glasses and a focussed air. I asked her in passing if she thought we'd have a moon base in my lifetime. "Absolutely," she said, with surprising force. Afterward, Ballard told me that the woman was Jennifer Edmunson, NASA's leading expert on moon dust. (Edmunson clarified that her expertise is in "lunar regolith simulants.")

3-D printing has emerged as a promising way to build the landing pads, roads, and other infrastructure we'd need to expand human habitation beyond Earth. Rather than rocketing construction materials into space, we could use 3-D printers to build structures with lunar materials. (The lack of available water on the moon poses additional problems, such as how to make the dust liquid enough to print; the best solution so far seems to involve melting it with lasers.) NASA recently awarded Icon a fifty-seven-million-dollar contract to develop lunar-construction technology. The company's Web site now has pages dedicated to both Residential Construction and Off-World Construction.

It is difficult to build utopian housing in a non-utopian world. Many of the mid-century attempts at reinventing housing on an industrial scale eventually foundered. Building codes are highly localized, posing a challenge for mass production—a design that works in one place might not be permitted in another. And, though people may love hearing about new kinds of houses, they don't always want to inhabit them. Buckminster Fuller's own geodesic house leaked, and his wife wasn't sure how to hang pictures on the slanted walls.

Behrokh Khoshnevis, the engineer who pioneered 3-D-printed construction, has become jaded about the technology's potential. "All the hype is not warranted," he told me. When I asked him about his TEDx talk from a decade ago, he sounded wistful. "I was very optimistic," he said. Khoshnevis never succeeded at taking the technology mainstream. "I'm glad I started kind of a movement," he said. "And I'd like it to succeed. I think it will, but it's going to take time, and it's not going to be at the scale I envisioned originally—it's not going to be most buildings." He'd come to believe that the construction industry was not ready for a total disruption. The experience seemed to have made him philosophical. "The best thing is reality, knowing the reality, not living in fantasy," he said. "Understanding reality is as good of an achievement as materializing the fantasy that you have."

At the end of November, I visited Wolf Ranch, the development where Icon is printing a hundred houses for Lennar. The plot is in Georgetown, a former farming community that's being absorbed by the northward sprawl of Austin. It was the first time I'd seen Vulcans at work outside. Their nozzles glided over concrete slabs, tracing the outlines of rooms.

Ballard strode across the development to greet me. We walked along the neighborhood's curving streets, toward an unfinished house, whose walls were about five feet high. A worker in a hard hat and a fluorescent vest bent over an iPad, which he used to adjust the nozzle's speed. (Ballard is often asked whether 3-D printing will destroy jobs in construction. His standard response is that the industry is suffering from a serious labor shortage. "If you know construction workers standing around, looking for work, can you please send them to Texas?" he said.) Apart from the churn of a Magma mixing LavaCrete and the occasional beeping of a reversing delivery truck, the site was notably quiet.

The project was several months behind schedule. The Vulcans had, for the most part, performed as expected; the challenge was everything else. It had been a cold and rainy fall, suboptimal printing weather, and then there were all the operational difficulties—pouring slabs, coördinating deliveries, waiting for a delayed shipment of power transformers. "It's no joke, it's like a military deployment," Ballard said. "Mistakes are tens of thousands of dollars per day." The initial houses had taken between three and four weeks to print, and Ballard was eager to speed things up. "I would love to see us go, like, blazing-saddles fast," he said. He planned to petition the city of Georgetown to get permission to print twenty-four hours a day.

When they're complete, the Wolf Ranch houses will range from fifteen hundred to twenty-one hundred square feet and come equipped with solar panels on their pitched metal roofs. Lennar anticipates that their prices will start in the mid-four-hundred-thousand-dollar range. The eight different floor plans were designed by the Bjarke Ingels Group. The houses had some of the distinct characteristics of 3-D-printed architecture—curved corners, ribbed walls—but there were no squomes in sight. "They are still the children of rectangular thinking," Ballard said. "Lennar wanted to keep it one standard deviation from normal, whereas Bjarke wanted to go, like, three. We'll take it one step at a time."

The development will be a neighborhood of single-family ranch-style houses, each with a two-car garage and a green patch of lawn. The future always looks more like the present than I expect it to. I said something like this to Ballard, and he briefly bristled. "If an entirely solar-powered community, made of resilient materials, designed by a world-class architect, at working-class prices, doesn't feel like a paradigm shift—we'll try harder, but I'm pretty proud of it."

Then he conceded the point. "What you're feeling I also feel," he said. More radical things were in the works, he assured me. A new generation of printers, expanded capabilities, dramatically increased speeds. Printing homes by the thousands, designing communities, reimagining the built world. In the meantime, he'd applied to be in NASA's next astronaut crew. He'd been rejected on this round, but he planned to try again. You never know what might happen next. ♦

A REPORTER AT LARGE

TRUST ISSUES

A disgruntled wealth manager exposes her clients' tax secrets.

BY EVAN OSNOS

For the very rich, private wealth managers are in a separate class from other retainers, even from the trusted pilots, chefs, and attendants who maintain their life styles. Guarding the capital—the "corpus," as it's known in the business—puts you in contact with a family's most closely held secrets. Managers handle delicate tasks; one professional in the Cayman Islands described the sensitivity of making a financial plan for an out-of-wedlock child that "has to be kept totally private from the wife." Others specialize in keeping clients out of the news by minimizing public transactions. The most devoted liken themselves to clergy or consiglieri, and tend to get prime seats at the kids' weddings and the patriarch's deathbed.

Marlena Sonn entered the wealth-management industry in 2010, and found a niche working with what she called "progressive, ultra-high-net-worth millennials, women, inheritors, and family offices." She sought to create a refuge from jargon and bro culture. "Women and young people are talked down to," she told me. "A level of respect for people is refreshing."

Sonn didn't come from money. She was born in Queens, to parents from South Korea, who she says were determined to see her "fulfill the American Dream—go to Ivy League schools and become a doctor or a lawyer." As a student at Barnard College, she was drawn to the punk and goth scenes and to progressive politics. After school, she moved to San Francisco, campaigned for a higher minimum wage, and planned on a career in activism. But in 2005, while working at a nonprofit, she developed an unexpected fascination with her retirement account. She took to listening to analyst calls with C.E.O.s, buying stocks on E-Trade, and watching exultantly as some of her picks spiked in value. Within a few years, she had left the nonprofit world for finance. "That was where the real levers of power were," she said, adding, "My parents were so relieved."

She started out at a small firm in lower Manhattan, working as a receptionist and studying at night to become a financial planner. Once she was certified, she signed up clients who wanted to "align their wealth with their values." Her new role obligated her to master a shifting vocabulary of noblesse oblige. "They keep changing the name," she said. "It went from 'socially responsible investing' to 'E.S.G.'"—environmental, social, and governance. "Now it's what we call 'impact investing.'" What firms like hers offered was not charity; it was capitalism with progressive characteristics. "We would work out tax-efficient strategies to move clients out of legacy positions and into a new portfolio that was more simpatico with their conscience," she said. For clients who had investments in "offender industries," such as fossil fuels or private prisons, she could help them sell the stock and plant trees in the Amazon, structuring the trades to minimize the cost in taxes.

In the spring of 2013, a lawyer told her about a potential client who might benefit from Sonn's expertise: a young woman in line to inherit part of an iconic American fortune. The lawyer was cagey about specifics, but eventually identified the prospect as Kendalle P. Getty, a granddaughter of the oil tycoon J. Paul Getty. In the nineteen-fifties, Getty was declared the richest living American.

Sonn and Kendalle met for dinner at a restaurant in Williamsburg and discussed her situation. Kendalle had become an heir in a roundabout way. Her father, Gordon Getty, a composer and a philanthropist in San Francisco, worth an estimated $2.1 billion, had four sons with his wife, Ann. Secretly, he also fathered three daughters in Los Angeles during an extramarital affair. In 1999, their mother asked a court to recognize them as legal descendants. When the story broke, Gordon was vacationing with his wife on a friend's yacht in the Mediterranean; he released a statement acknowledging that he was the girls' father, and proclaimed, "I love them very much."

Gordon cut his daughters in on the Getty fortune using a trust fund—in essence, an imaginary legal lockbox that can shelter assets from taxes, creditors, and ex-spouses. Though trusts have been around since the Middle Ages, they have recently experienced a surge of innovation and popularity, as wealthy people pursue ever stronger ways to avoid publicity and taxes. The trust that Gordon created was named Pleiades, for a set of sisters in Greek myth who had dalliances with Olympian gods and were immortalized as stars in the night sky. It was arranged to grow until Gordon's death, at which time the sisters would gain control of a pile of assets that Sonn estimated would be worth about a billion dollars.

Over dinner with Kendalle, Sonn felt "an instantaneous meeting of the minds." Despite the differences in their backgrounds, the two women shared political views and an irreverent posture toward the money around them. Kendalle, a multimedia artist, identified herself on Instagram as a "bastard princess," and advertised support for "environmental conservation, animal welfare, human rights, and reforming the way the justice system handles gendered violence, racial inequities and bias, and transphobia." She seemed eager to pull money out of the petroleum investments that had built the Gettys' wealth and repurpose it, in a spirit that Sonn likened to reparations.

Kendalle had a nest egg of about five million dollars, administered by Goldman Sachs. She moved a million of it to Sonn, who agreed to invest it for an annual fee of one per cent of the assets—a

SOURCE PHOTOGRAPHS FROM GETTY

Marlena Sonn, an adviser to one of the country's richest families, hoped to reform the system. Her efforts have ended in lawsuits.

standard industry rate. Their relationship flourished. Kendalle soon transferred the rest of her assets to Sonn, and introduced her to one of her sisters, Alexandra S. Getty. Known as Sarah, she split her time between Los Angeles, New York, and Japan, and identified herself on social media as an "artist, webtoon creator, boxer, runner, and vegan." Sarah hired Sonn, and within a year the sisters asked her to help run their trust fund, too. As her duties expanded, Sonn assisted Sarah with insurance and real estate. She helped Kendalle manage art projects, pay bills, and navigate family dynamics. The three bantered by texts punctuated with "LOL," "Okee Dokee," and "Love you."

For nearly eight years, Sonn served the Getty sisters as an adviser and a confidante, until the relationship underwent a spectacular rupture. In a lawsuit filed last March, Kendalle's lawyers accused Sonn of "unjust enrichment," saying that she "coerced" her client into promising a bonus worth millions of dollars. In a countersuit, Sonn accused the Gettys and their advisers of retaliating for her opposition to a "dubious tax avoidance scheme" that could save them as much as $300 million. Robert Leberman, the administrator of the trust, and one of the defendants in Sonn's suit, denied her allegations against the family. In a statement, he said that Sonn's firing had been "non-retaliatory and warranted," and that the suit was a "sad example of overreaching by someone now seeking to take advantage of a position of trust."

As it moved through the courts, Sonn's complaint, which contained portions of family e-mails and texts, marked the rarest of indiscretions from a financier who serves the super-rich. Wealth managers like to say, "A submerged whale does not get harpooned." In this case, one of their own was allowing one of America's richest clans to heave into view.

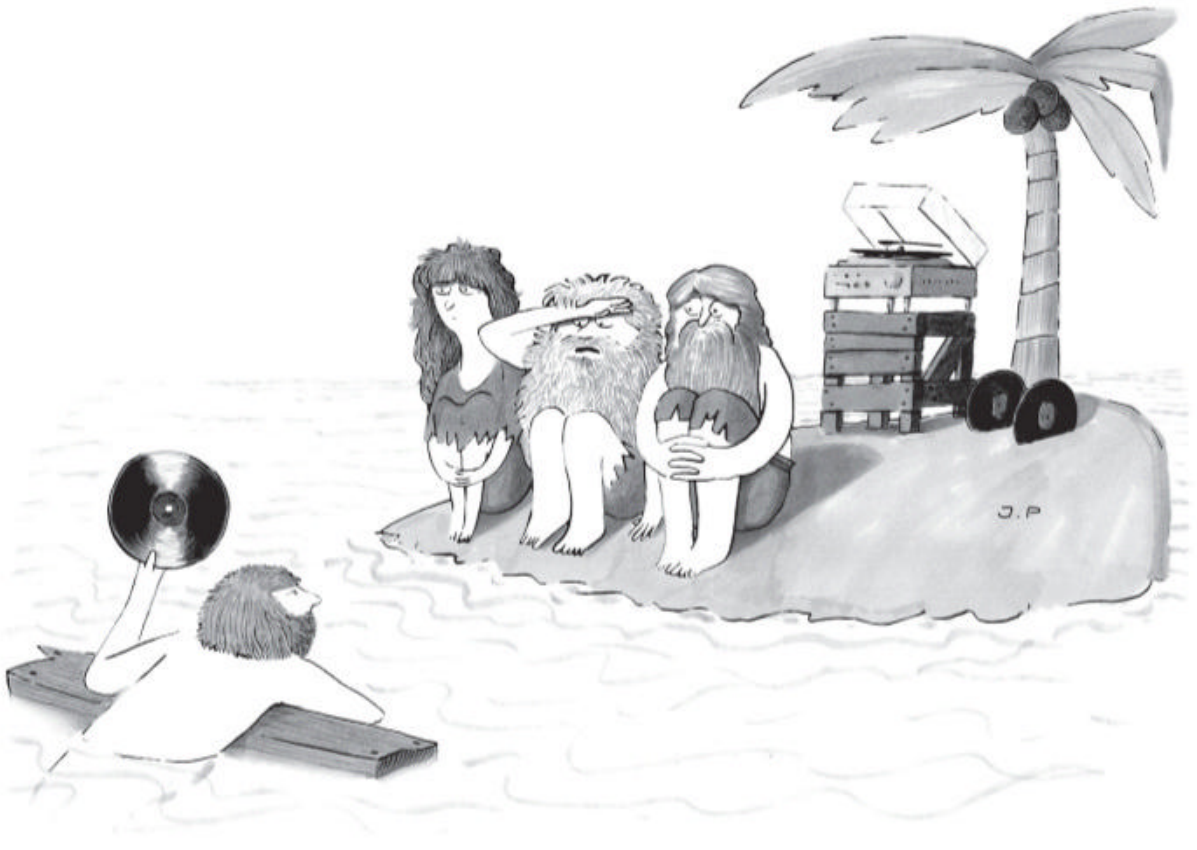
The arc of an American fortune, it is often said, goes from "shirtsleeves to shirtsleeves in three generations." Other cultures have similar admonitions. The Japanese version is bleak: "The third generation ruins the house." The Germans dwell on the mechanics: "Acquire it, inherit it, destroy it."

And yet, in recent times, the fortunes of many prominent American clans have soared. Between 1983 and 2020, the net worth of the Kochs, who prospered in fossil fuels and became right-wing mega-donors, grew twenty-five-fold, from $3.9 billion to $100 billion. The Mars-family fortune, which began in the candy business, grew by a factor of thirty-six, to $94 billion. The Waltons, of Walmart, expanded their fortune forty-four-fold, to $247 billion. The financial triumph of such clans helps explain how the imbalance of wealth in the United States has risen to levels unseen in a century. In 1978, the top 0.1 per cent of Americans owned about seven per cent of the nation's wealth; today, according to the World Inequality Database, it owns eighteen per cent.

A century ago, American law handled the rare pleasure of a giant inheritance with suspicion. Instead of allowing money to cascade through generations, like a champagne tower, we siphoned off some of the flow through taxes on estates, gifts, and capital gains. As the Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote in 1927, "Taxes are what we pay for civilized society." But, since the late seventies, American politics has taken a more accommodating approach to dynastic fortunes—slashing rates, widening exemptions, and permitting a vast range of esoteric loopholes for wealthy taxpayers. According to Emmanuel Saez and Gabriel Zucman, economists at the University of California, Berkeley, the average tax rate on the top 0.01 per cent has fallen by more than half, to about thirty per cent, while rates for the bottom ninety per cent have climbed slightly, to an average of twenty-five per cent.

Some advisers to ultra-rich families describe the current era as a golden age of tax avoidance. Last May, Marvin Blum, a Texas lawyer and accountant, gave a seminar for fellow-accountants who were figuring out how to profit from the influx of wealth that needed protecting. Blum told his colleagues, "Conditions for leaving large sums have never been better," noting that "Congress has not closed an estate-planning loophole in over thirty years." In a report from 2021, the Treasury Department estimated that the top one per cent of taxpayers are responsible for twenty-eight per cent of the nation's unpaid taxes, amounting to an annual shortfall of more than $160 billion.

When it comes to taxes, there have always been advantages in certain lines of work. If your money comes from complex investments, it is easier to avoid taxes than if your employer regularly reports your income to the Internal Revenue Service. The same is true of tips and cash, which is how many low-income workers receive their wages. But the wealthiest Americans have access



"Please, gods, not Rachmaninoff again."

to ever more creative dodges—most of them legal, some illegal, and some on the murky border in between.

That lucrative maneuvering is the realm of specialized attorneys, accountants, and money managers, many of whom work for family offices: in-house financial teams that typically include a dozen or so full-time attendants. Family offices, which have roots in nineteenth-century operations that served John D. Rockefeller and a handful of his peers, have proliferated in the past two decades, to at least ten thousand worldwide. They tend to have no public presence—Gordon Getty's family office is known, inconspicuously, as Vallejo Investments—but by some estimates they control about six trillion dollars in assets, a larger sum than is managed by all the world's hedge funds.

Critics of global inequality call this stratum of business the "wealth-defense industry," and have pushed Congress to impose taxes, eliminate loopholes, and restore narrower limits on American inheritance. The cultural outrage has grown lately. A series of disclosures, beginning in 2016 with a leak from the law firm Mossack Fonseca, have revealed spectacular extremes of high-priced tax maneuvering—which, among other consequences, brought down the leader of Iceland and embarrassed the Prime Minister of the U.K. In that year's Presidential election, Donald Trump bragged that he was "smart" for not paying taxes, provoking fury among opponents and agreement among supporters. By 2019, Senator Elizabeth Warren, of Massachusetts, was calling for people with fortunes of more than $50 million to give up two cents on every additional dollar—a formula repeated so often that crowds at her events began chanting, "Two cents! Two cents!"

Scholars of wealth and taxes say that the golden age of élite tax avoidance has contributed to the turbulence in American politics, by hardening social stratification; reducing public resources for education, health, and infrastructure; and eroding trust in America's mythologies of fairness and opportunity. Edward McCaffery, a tax professor at the U.S.C. Gould School of Law, said, "Tax, which is supposed to be a cure, is in fact one of the problems. This is a pattern that recurs throughout history. Capital keeps getting more and more unequal, until there's a crash."

But Tom Handler, a Chicago tax lawyer who specializes in ultra-wealthy clients, told me that the political pressure on the one per cent has only generated more business for him and his peers. "Most of the high-net-worth client base, they're running for cover," he said. "So income-tax planning has gone up, estate-tax planning has gone up, asset protection has gone up." Handler's clients feel "vilified," he said. "Other than the very liberal, highly educated, intellectual élite, they don't feel guilty at all. They're angry."

For people born to the most elevated classes, the fight over a few points' difference in tax rates can feel existential. Brooke Harrington, a Dartmouth sociology professor whose book "Capital Without Borders" examines the tools of tax avoidance, told me that families like the Kochs, the Waltons, and the Gettys have escaped the old adages about generational decline thanks to a "perpetual-motion machine of wealth creation." Often, she said, "the advisers' job is protecting the fortune from the family. Without clever wealth management and attorneys, the Getty fortune would've gone up in smoke."

What the Vanderbilt name represented in the Gilded Age, or the names Musk and Bezos might in our time, Getty was to postwar America: a reigning symbol of what money can do. The family fortune began in 1903, when a couple of flinty, frugal Minnesotans named George and Sarah Getty struck oil in Oklahoma. The trade was so profitable that their son, J. Paul Getty, became a millionaire by the age of twenty-three—at which point he announced his retirement. He saw "no reason why I should exert myself further to make more," he wrote, in a memoir called "My Life and Fortunes." He would focus instead on "enjoying myself," and in that pursuit he acquired Hollywood friends, such as Charlie Chaplin and Gloria Swanson, and abundant hangers-on.

His parents, devout Methodists, disapproved. They told him that a rich man must "keep his money working to justify its existence." Paul dutifully returned to the family business, but when his father died, in 1930, the will contained a harsh surprise: the estate, some $15 million, had been bequeathed almost entirely to Sarah. Paul complained to his mother, who agreed to sell him her share of the company as a Christmas present. She codified the deal with a formal offer, noting that it would expire if "not accepted by you in writing on or before noon of 30 December." But, even as they reached an agreement, she worried that her son might lose the fortune, so she locked up some of it in what accountants call a "spendthrift trust," which gives the beneficiary limited access to the funds.

Her worries turned out to be misplaced. For Paul, the insult of the will had stirred a strain of suspicion and thrift that would develop into compulsion. Claus von Bülow, a top lieutenant at Getty Oil, later described Paul's attitude: "Dad was going to eat his words." (Von Bülow became famous himself when he was convicted of trying to kill his wife, Martha, an heiress to a utilities fortune; he was subsequently acquitted.) Paul put nearly all his energy and profits back into the company and the trust. His biggest bet, on the oil prospects of a region between Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, became a bonanza. Within fifty years, the trust had grown a thousandfold, to four billion dollars.

He vowed to create a "Getty dynasty," but this was more a financial concept than a familial one. He had five divorces, and five sons, from whom he was so distant that he did not bother to attend their weddings. The alimony and child support he sent did not suggest the magnitude of his wealth. When, in 1957, *Fortune* crowned him the richest American, his sons were shocked. He was more interested in larger expressions of legacy. "I feel no qualms or reticence about likening the Getty Oil Company to an empire—and myself to a 'Caesar,'" he wrote.

Even compared with other wealthy skinflints, Paul was strikingly parsimonious. He installed a pay phone at Sutton Place, his seventy-two-room mansion in the English countryside, to avoid paying for guests' long-distance

calls. His last wife, a singer named Teddy Getty, had to beseech him to pay for maternity clothes, pointing out that he could deduct them from his taxes, as an expense for her performing career. In one emphatic letter, she wrote, "SO HERE AGAIN YOU HAVE LOST NOTHING." When their son, Timmy, was treated for a brain tumor, Paul declined to visit, and complained to Teddy that the doctors "grossly overcharged you." He wrote, "Some doctors like to charge a rich person 20 times more than their regular fee."

Getty took a similarly dim view of taxes. When he donated art works, he would value them at higher prices than he had paid and take a hefty deduction. He invited twelve hundred people to a mansion-warming party at Sutton Place and declared it a business expense. His tactics became so aggressive that President John F. Kennedy personally leaked details of Getty's taxes to *Newsweek*, revealing that, in a recent year, Getty had paid a total of $504 in federal income tax. Getty was undeterred; in his 1965 book, "How to Be Rich," he condemned an "insane hodgepodge of Federal, state, county and city levies that make life a fiscal nightmare for everyone." Elsewhere, he derided government spending on "nonproductive and very frequently counterproductive socialistic schemes."

Nothing exhibited his relationship to money more than his management of a family tragedy. In 1973, his sixteen-year-old grandson, John Paul Getty III, who had left school to be a painter in Rome, was kidnapped by Calabrian gangsters, who stashed him in the mountains and demanded $17 million for his safe return. The grandfather, by then known as Old Paul, suspected that it was a charade orchestrated by family members to extract money. He eventually relinquished that theory, but insisted he would never pay a ransom. "I have fourteen other grandchildren," he told the press, "and if I pay one penny now, I'll have fourteen kidnapped grandchildren."

After three months, the kidnappers, growing impatient, cut off the boy's right ear and mailed it to a newspaper, to broadcast their warning. They reduced their demand to about three million dollars, but threatened to cut off other body parts, too, if they got no reply. Ultimately, Old Paul consented to pay $2.2 million of the requested sum—the maximum, according to his biographer John Pearson, that advisers had told him was tax deductible. He made up the balance by loaning his son the money at four per cent interest.

When Old Paul died, in 1976, he was living in England but trying to avoid British taxes by claiming to be a resident of California—even though he had not been to California in a quarter century. After his death, members of the family feuded in court, and forced the sale of Getty Oil to Texaco. Eventually, four factions of the family agreed to divvy up the trust into portions of $750 million apiece, and to pay a tax bill of a billion dollars. One of the lawyers likened it to "an elaborate treaty negotiation among warring nations."

Even the dismembered parts of the realm were vast. One son, Paul, Jr., instantly became the sixth-richest man in Britain, with interest payments alone earning him a million dollars a week. Most of Old Paul's personal estate—his art, property, land—was insulated from taxes almost entirely, thanks to a final gesture to keep the money out of the government's hands: he bequeathed it to a museum trust that would carry on his name forever.

The Getty Center, on a sun-drenched hilltop in the Santa Monica Mountains, is one of America's most visited art museums. Its walls and walkways are made of pale travertine, mined from an ancient quarry east of Rome. It's the same type of stone that you find in the Trevi Fountain and the Colosseum, a material, as the museum puts it, "historically associated with public architecture." This is a telling bit of sleight of hand: public architecture belongs to the public, a concession that Old Paul Getty fought his whole life to avoid. On a nearby stretch of coastline, with panoramic views of the Pacific, its sister museum, the Getty Villa, occupies a re-created Roman country house that is more popular with the public than with architects. Joan Didion once described it as "a palpable contract between the very rich and the people who distrust them least."

But this kind of prominence should not be mistaken for happiness. Through the years, Old Paul's protectors have suggested that he was the greatest victim of his own stinginess. "The only person he was ever mean with was himself," Robina Lund, a lover and a longtime aide, once said. In 1963, a BBC documentary called "The Solitary Billionaire" featured him dining alone at a seventy-foot banquet table and performing exercises in a three-piece suit, hoisting a barbell over his head, beside a wall decorated with a Renoir. "The money is the root of the problem with the Gettys," Gordon's confidant William Newsom once said, according to Russell Miller's book "The House of Getty." "It is a ludicrous, preposterous amount of money, enough to make you wonder if anybody in the world should have that much. It taints everything."

Marlena Sonn thought that she could help the Getty sisters expunge that taint, she told me one morning in November. We had met in a conference room of a co-working space in a converted pencil factory in Brooklyn. In a black-and-white dress and chunky glasses, with salt-and-pepper hair falling to her shoulders, she betrayed little sign of the erstwhile punk and activist. I wondered whether, working for the Gettys, she imagined herself as a sleeper cell, there to dismantle the system. "No," she said. "I thought we could reform it."

In the past century, the Gettys, like many American clans, have moved from a business of bare-knuckle extraction into more genteel labors; younger branches of the family extend into acting, conservation, and influence work. In 2021, Ivy Love Getty, an artist-model and a great-granddaughter of the oil tycoon, was married in San Francisco in a ceremony officiated by the House Speaker Nancy Pelosi.

But, Sarah Getty told me recently, her "crazy family history" and abrupt transformation into an heir gave her little preparation for managing a fortune. "In exchange for the love I didn't receive in my life, I got money," she said. "So, at first, I always felt misery and guilt, and I didn't know what to do with it." Sonn was twice her age, capable and solicitous. "Our relationship was very much like mother-daughter, because my mother wasn't very present in my life," she said. Sonn called her "babe," and they "would do things for fun, not just for work," Sarah said.

Sonn had been in the job less than two years when she caught a glimpse of how complex the inner workings of the family might be. In March, 2015, Kendalle and Sarah's half brother Andrew Getty died at his home in the Hollywood Hills—suffering, the Los Angeles County coroner's office found, from methamphetamine intoxication, heart disease, and bleeding linked to an ulcer. Sonn flew to San Francisco, to help handle the fallout. Andrew's death, she said, required a reshuffling of more than $200 million, as his share of a trust was redistributed among his siblings.

Sonn assisted Kendalle and Sarah as they navigated the complications of their new wealth. To oversee the Pleiades Trust, Gordon's family office had helped establish a corporate entity for each of the sisters, named for their initials: ASG Investments and KPG Investments. The sisters were the presidents, and Sonn became vice-president. Four times a year, Kendalle and Sarah received a dense book of several hundred pages, detailing investment decisions. "What do we do with this five million, and what do we do with that five million?" Sonn recalled. "They were asked to make decisions pretty much on the spot."

La Vie en Beige

For the next several years, Sonn consulted on investment strategies, interviewed money managers, and sometimes voted in Sarah's stead. One of her primary duties was monitoring the important matter of location. Sonn said that she was also enlisted in "maintaining the appearance" that Kendalle and Sarah neither resided nor transacted trust business in California, in order to minimize their exposure to state income tax, which ranges up to thirteen per cent. Across the family fortune, she said, "that's a lot of tax on billions of dollars." While their grandfather had sought to duck taxes by claiming California residency, Sonn was helping the granddaughters attempt that maneuver in reverse. Among other tactics, she helped Kendalle and Sarah buy real estate in New York, which could fortify their claim to dividing residency across multiple states. And she kept track of the time that each spent in California. "For Sarah, she was in Japan, then she was in New York, then she's in California. For Kendalle, she was back and forth between L.A. and New York, and also travelling. So there's this game of counting their days," she said.

The delicate arbitrage of state taxes is governed less by the constraints of the physical world than by the dream palace of accounting innovation. The original Getty trusts were established in California, but advisers had moved Gordon's to Nevada in 1995. In an effort to spur the local economy, Nevada had taken to promoting itself as the "Delaware of the West," with no taxes on income, inheritances, or capital gains. The financial upside bordered on the supernatural. Consider a typical Nevada trust scenario: as a planner at a family office, you put the maximum sum allowed, tax-free, into a trust; under current laws, that's a meaty $12.9 million. By simply entering a long-term trust, that sum becomes immune to the forty-per-cent tax that applies to ordinary assets at the turn of every generation. After seventy-five years, your $12.9 million will balloon to approximately $502 million, according to calculations by the Northern Trust Institute, a wealth-management firm based in Chicago. That's more than quadruple the growth it would experience outside the trust.

To enjoy the financial advantages of Nevada, the Gettys did not have to move there. The Pleiades Trust was officially administered from a small office complex a block from the Reno-Tahoe airport: Airport Gardens, which shared a parking lot with a private investigator and a hobby shop selling electric trains. In all the years Sonn worked with Kendalle and Sarah, they had never, as far as she was aware, set foot in Airport Gardens.

One particular ritual was sacrosanct: four times a year, to maintain the claim that their trust was not run from California, they boarded jets to some locale beyond the state border, before casting their official votes on investment decisions. "It would be a different place every quarter," Sonn said. "New York, Seattle. Once a year, it would be in Nevada, usually in Las Vegas, because none of the family members

wanted to go to Reno." Buried in the details of California law was a statute that said that, as long as they could make the case that they never did the "major portion" of their business in California, they might each be able to dodge tens of millions of dollars in taxes on the inheritance.

The question of how much to leave your kids has been with us since the Ice Age. At a site called Sungir, east of Moscow, which holds the remains of hunter-foragers from at least thirty thousand years ago, archeologists found children with spears, art, and furs adorned with thousands of beads, painstakingly carved from mammoth tusks. Researchers calculate that shaping each bead took as long as forty-five minutes, so the kids' finery represented years' worth of labor by someone else—a prehistoric trust fund.

For the one in five American households that receive any family money at all, it can fortify a sense of identity and solidarity. And, in normal quantities, it narrows inequality, by helping low-income families pay for homes and education. (The average American bequest today is around forty-six thousand dollars, according to the Survey of Consumer Finances.) But, when inheritance patterns reach extremes, they wreak social and political havoc. In ancient Greece, the Spartans developed rules that consolidated property into a narrow class of heirs, while the growing population of people left behind were reclassified as *hypomeiones*—inferiors. By the third century B.C.E., tensions between the groups had pushed Spartan politics into violent convulsions over land, debt, and power.

The concept of a trust—the holding of property for the benefit of another—developed in the fourteenth century, among English landowners who were called up to the Crusades. To avoid transferring assets to their wives, since women were restricted from owning land, they entrusted control temporarily to male friends and relatives. Trusts proved immensely popular. "Nobles figured out very quickly that it was a great way to dodge taxes," Harrington, the Dartmouth sociologist, said. "Property taxes were due only if the owner of a property died, so, if you kept playing hot potato with the deed, effectively the owner never died." In 1682, to curb gaming of the law, England's Lord Nottingham established a "rule against perpetuities," which set the maximum length of a trust at the life span of the beneficiary plus twenty-one years.

That term limit endured for centuries, not only in England but eventually in the United States, where a resistance to inherited nobility was among the founding ideals. Thomas Jefferson believed that steep inheritance taxes would encourage an "aristocracy of virtue and talent," which he regarded as "essential to a well ordered republic." Thomas Paine wanted taxes on the largest estates to approach "the point of prohibition." Even some of America's greatest entrepreneurs saw inheritances as a handicap—a "misguided affection," as Andrew Carnegie put it. William K. Vanderbilt, a descendant of Cornelius, observed, evidently from experience, that inherited wealth was "as certain a death to ambition as cocaine is to morality."

Theodore Roosevelt took steps toward a progressive tax on inheritances, in the belief that a "man of great wealth owes a peculiar obligation to the State, because he derives special advantages from the mere existence of government." A ten-per-cent estate tax went into effect in 1916; the Great Depression and the New Deal fuelled calls for higher levies, and by 1941 the top rate had climbed to seventy-seven per cent, where it remained for decades.

Ever since then, Americans have groped for a balance between the instinct to bequeath and the dangers of excess. Running for President in 1972, George McGovern proposed that nobody should be allowed to receive more than half a million dollars in inheritance and gifts. People hated the idea. His spokesman, Richard Dougherty,

THE LOVERS

One of them is still there, in the smell of burnt toast
    and dirty clothes that was my twenties, always waiting
to be picked up outside some station, that tenderness
set against each building's law of metal and stone.

One of them is still on a slope of the Sandias,
jeans pushed down to his knees
    so I can pick out the cactus needles from his thigh.
    The sky is late, the color of grape soda. In weeks, he will go
to a war, write letters that now sleep in a box
in the basement, next to a box of Christmas ornaments.

I open a book I read in college
    and one of them is in the margins, his handwriting
an enthusiastic vine, like the vines at the edges
of medieval texts, each "O" of his cursive a tiny horse chestnut,
    the paperback's pages yellow as a smoker's fingers.

Another one is still on his motorcycle
between Connecticut and Manhattan, driving a cab on weekends
for his tuition. On the nights I rode behind him,
    my head against the black leather of his back, I knew
I would die many times before my death.

One death for the one walking down Iowa Avenue,
    brooding on the problem of wearing a jacket
over a Halloween costume. One death
for the one scorned by his parents and brothers.

One death for the one locked for days in his room, drawing lines
in a notebook, over and over and over.

Standing in front of a glass case in a museum, he is beside me,
looking at the silver hand
resting like a claw on the gray velvet.
Another one is in his grandfather's miles of orchards,
a place more immense because he is a boy
lost in it, even though everything he sees is his kingdom.

There is no logic in what we keep.
The freckles on his forearms. The surgery scar
on his shoulder. The reliquary that outlasts the bone of the saint.

In the coffeehouse, I see them, the lovers,
the two teen-age boys on a couch,
cuddling into one fused shape, one boy holding a phone
they lean toward, their faces lit by the platinum glow.
I have been them, and whatever comes after,

and it has taken all my heart to contain both.
There is no logic in what we keep, even of ourselves.

I am near him on a winter beach, the sky above shining like coal.
I am sitting with him on a sidewalk
and he is weeping. I am alone in a hotel room,
thinking of all the ice machines on every floor of every hotel
in the world, the sad machines dreaming
of each pure cube of light.

—Rick Barot

identified the concern: "Every slob in the street thinks that if he hits the lottery big, he may be able to leave half a million to his family."

In the nineteen-nineties, conservatives, pressing to eliminate the estate tax, condemned it as a "death tax," and insisted that it imperilled family farms. The evidence was always elusive; in the early two-thousands, Neil Harl, a prominent economist at Iowa State University, searched for family farms that had been killed by the tax, and concluded, "It's a myth." But the effort never really had much to do with farmers; according to a 2006 study by the nonprofit groups Public Citizen and United for a Fair Economy, it was financed by eighteen ultra-wealthy dynasties, including the founding families of Gallo wine and Campbell's soup.

The campaign succeeded spectacularly. In 1976, about 139,000 American households were eligible for the estate tax; by 2020, it had been punctured by so many exemptions that only 1,275 households nationwide had to pay. Gary Cohn, Trump's economic adviser who helped engineer the most recent loosening of the provision, was heard to tell members of Congress, "Only morons pay the estate tax."

So how, exactly, do the well-to-do find a way around taxes? There are functional concerns and ethical ones. The line between avoidance and evasion is not mysterious. It's perfectly legal to avoid taxes by honestly reporting losses and deducting expenses, and it's perfectly illegal to evade them with lies (by understating income or bartering to avoid sales, among many other techniques). The more intriguing terrain is where most Americans dwell, between avoidance and acquiescence. Researchers who study I.R.S. data chart our behavior on a continuum, from "flagrantly defiant" (people who cheat even at great risk) through "strategic" (calculators of costs and benefits) to "conflicted" (moral agonists) and "pathologically honest" (bless their hearts).

The simplest way to avoid income taxes is to avoid "income." If you run a company, alert the press that your salary is a dollar a year; then, for walking-around money, summon your banker to provide a "portfolio loan," which uses your stock as collateral. Because it's a loan, you'll owe no taxes on the cash. Better yet, if you cling to your winning stocks until you die, the moment that your soul departs your body it will take your capital-gains obligations with it. Whatever taxes you would have had to pay on the rising value of the stock vanish into a loophole known as the "stepped-up basis"—or, as admirers call it, the "angel of death."

A vestige of a time when paper records made it difficult to pinpoint how much an asset had grown, the angel-of-death loophole endures today as a giveaway to the rich, estimated to cost the Treasury as much as $54 billion a year. If Jeff Bezos died tomorrow, a hundred billion dollars of gains on his Amazon stock would go untaxed. This tidy routine—skip the income, live off loans, and avoid capital gains until you go—can run forever. McCaffery, of U.S.C., calls it "buy, borrow, die."

The wealth-management industry prefers a gentler vocabulary; it makes fewer mentions of money and taxes than of creating "meaningful legacies" and of fending off "wealth attrition" and "dilution." In 2021, ProPublica deployed leaked tax data to investigate some of the most meaningful legacies of recent years: $205 million for the son of the opioid-maker Mortimer Sackler; $570 million in trust income for William Wrigley, Jr., the great-grandson of the chewing-gum magnate. If you're strategic enough, even less iconic brands can produce a dynasty. Just ask the princely tribes endowed by Family Dollar, Public Storage, and Hot Pockets microwave pastries.

Managers like to hail the forethought of "first-generation wealth creators" and "patriarchs and matriarchs." But the industry's most important concept involves no venture at all; it is simply endurance. When Chuck Collins, a great-grandson

of the meatpacker Oscar Mayer, told a fellow-heir that he planned to give away the corpus in his trust, she invoked the goose that lays the golden egg. "You don't barbecue the goose," she said. In 2014, not long after the French economist Thomas Piketty warned of the reëmergence of "hereditary aristocracy," a trade magazine for the wealth-management industry carried an illustration of a medieval knight, bearing a sword and a mace, guarding overflowing bags of cash. The caption read, "Armour for your assets." Like any combatants, wealth managers gather intelligence: a tax lawyer told me that his firm had used the Freedom of Information Act to obtain a copy of an internal I.R.S. handbook, which lists the thresholds that agents use to determine if a discount is suspiciously large.

To understand the quietest corners of the tax-avoidance world, I called Bob Lord, a lawyer in Arizona whose tax practice once helped clients find loopholes. Lord, who was born in 1956 and raised in Maryland, entered the business in the nineteen-eighties, just as the drive for deregulation was triggering an obscure but seismic change in state law. In 1983, South Dakota became the first U.S. state to abolish the ancient "rule against perpetuities," clearing the way for what became known as "dynasty trusts," which can shield assets from inheritance taxes for centuries. Other states raced to catch up. Nevada set its limit at three hundred and sixty-five years, Alaska at a thousand. South Dakota barred any limit at all, akin to feudal England. "We had this crazy competition where states are trying to outdo each other in giving cushy tax situations," Lord said. "They think that by attracting rich people and their businesses they're going to do better than taxing those rich people."

Lord was struck by how much the distribution of wealth had changed in his lifetime. "I played a lot of golf as a kid," he said. "My parents belonged to Woodmont, the premier Jewish club. And I remember these tremendously wealthy people—they would drive a Mercedes, maybe fly first class—but they didn't have the kind of wealth people have today." Eventually, he found it impossible to abide the inequality that his advice helped create: "We have this insanely rich country, but we have people living horribly because of a terrible distribution of wealth." In 2013, he started analyzing tax issues for the Institute for Policy Studies, a liberal think tank, and he is now a senior adviser to the Patriotic Millionaires, a group of wealthy advocates for more stringent taxes on themselves. "If we hadn't allowed all of this avoidance to take place over the last four or five decades, where would we be now?" he said. "I worry about what's going to happen two or three decades from now if nothing is done. We will have families with wealth in the trillions."

To have any hope of joining the trillionaire club, an aspiring family should avail itself of levers installed out of reach of lesser Americans. Owning Thoroughbreds can allow you to write off millions in pleasant investment losses each year. The same goes for auto racing and cattle ranching. And don't forget the private-jet loophole created by Trump's tax law, which allowed family offices to soak up "excess business losses" by upgrading the Gulfstream.

But perhaps nothing has contributed more to the latest revival of dynastic fortunes than a spate of innovation around trusts, known by such recondite acronyms as SLATs, CRUTs, and BDITs. (The opacity is no accident. The late U.S. senator Carl Levin, a critic of finance abuses, accused the industry of deflecting attention with MEGOs—"My Eyes Glaze Over" schemes.) The most coveted are GRATs, or grantor-retained annuity trusts. The recipe requires only two steps: have your lawyer set up a trust on paper with your heirs as beneficiaries, and fill it with assets that you strongly suspect will rise in value—say, the stock of your company about to go public. As soon as the assets grow faster than interest rates, voilà! Your heirs receive almost all the difference, and it's tax-free. It doesn't count as a gift, because the trust is, technically, an annuity, which pays you back over two or three years. Best of all, there's nothing to stop you from setting up a new GRAT every month. Sheldon Adelson, the late casino owner, sometimes had at least ten at once; in one three-year period, according to Bloomberg, he used them to escape $2.8 billion in taxes. The benefits of the GRAT are obvious, Handler, the tax lawyer, told me: it's cheap, simple, and easy to repeat. "Even unsophisticated clients can understand that one."

Like many tax-avoidance strategies, the GRAT was dreamed up in a law firm and released into the wild to see if it could survive the courts. In 2000, the I.R.S. challenged its use by the former wife of the brother of the Walmart founder, Sam Walton—and lost. "The tax court's decision just blew this loop-

"Thank you for waking me up from the witch's curse! Can you hand me my phone?"

hole wide open," Lord said. "For twenty-two years, everyone has known you can do this. You've got a tax-court decision that basically blesses it, and Congress hasn't done anything about it." In honor of its first patron, the tactic is often called a Walton GRAT.

The ethics around avoiding taxes are themselves a form of inheritance. "Families just grow up in it," McCaffery said. "The patriarch never paid much in taxes. And you're just in a world in which, four times a year, you're going to Nevada or wherever."

For half a century, Gordon Getty has lived in a grand yellow Italianate mansion in Pacific Heights, with sweeping views of the Golden Gate Bridge and Alcatraz. Over the years, he and Ann, a publisher and a decorator, expanded their living space, buying the house next door (to make room for his work at the piano) and then the house next door to that. They hosted charity events, opera stars, and fundraisers for politicians, including Kamala Harris and Gavin Newsom. (Newsom's father, William, one of Gordon's friends since high school, managed the family trust for years.)

Sonn became accustomed to the rhythms of life in the Getty orbit: the talk of political allies, the family's trips on their Boeing 727, known as "the Jetty." And yet, by 2018, after four years of criss-crossing the country to attend to the Gettys' finances, elements of the job were making her increasingly uncomfortable. For one thing, she said, her employers had refused to contribute to her health insurance or her payroll taxes, to avoid the appearance of operating in New York, where she lived. For another, helping to manage a family's most sensitive financial deliberations could be an emotional process; these are "blood-sucking" jobs, as one finance professional put it. Sarah Getty told me, "My anxiety mind will take over sometimes and be, like, Should I spend less? Should I spend more? Am I being selfish right now? I didn't need that massage chair." (She added, "I didn't get a massage chair, don't worry. But I *thought* about it.") For Sarah, it complicated matters that Sonn "was also representing Kendalle, who I don't always get along with."

There were disputes about the dispensation of funds. Sarah supported animal-advocacy groups, such as the World Wildlife Fund, but Sonn advised her instead to donate to the Amazon Basin, to protect the landscape and its Indigenous people from environmental harm. "I care about those things as well, don't get me wrong," Sarah told me. "It's just the fact that she picked it, and I felt manipulated." There was also friction over Sonn's compensation. She had started at a base salary of $180,000, along with her fees as an investment adviser, and though her salary eventually more than doubled, she discovered that some other suppliers of advisory services to Getty trusts had collected at least $1 million a year. She complained to Kendalle and Sarah, who agreed to pay her a hefty bonus when the trust fund opened, a percentage that she calculated would come to about $4 million.

Another debate was far more sensitive: Sonn suspected that members of the Getty family might be violating California tax laws. By getting on the plane four times a year to vote elsewhere, and keeping the back office in Reno, they had justified putting off the payment of an estimated $116 million in California taxes on the sisters' trust, according to Sonn. Employing a similar approach with at least two other family funds, they had, by Sonn's estimate, deferred a combined $300 million in payments. In truth, she said, they often worked on the Pleiades Trust while in California; in 2016, for instance, she had visited Gordon's house in Pacific Heights to help interview a battery of prospective financial advisers. "All of the candidates flew into San Francisco," she said.

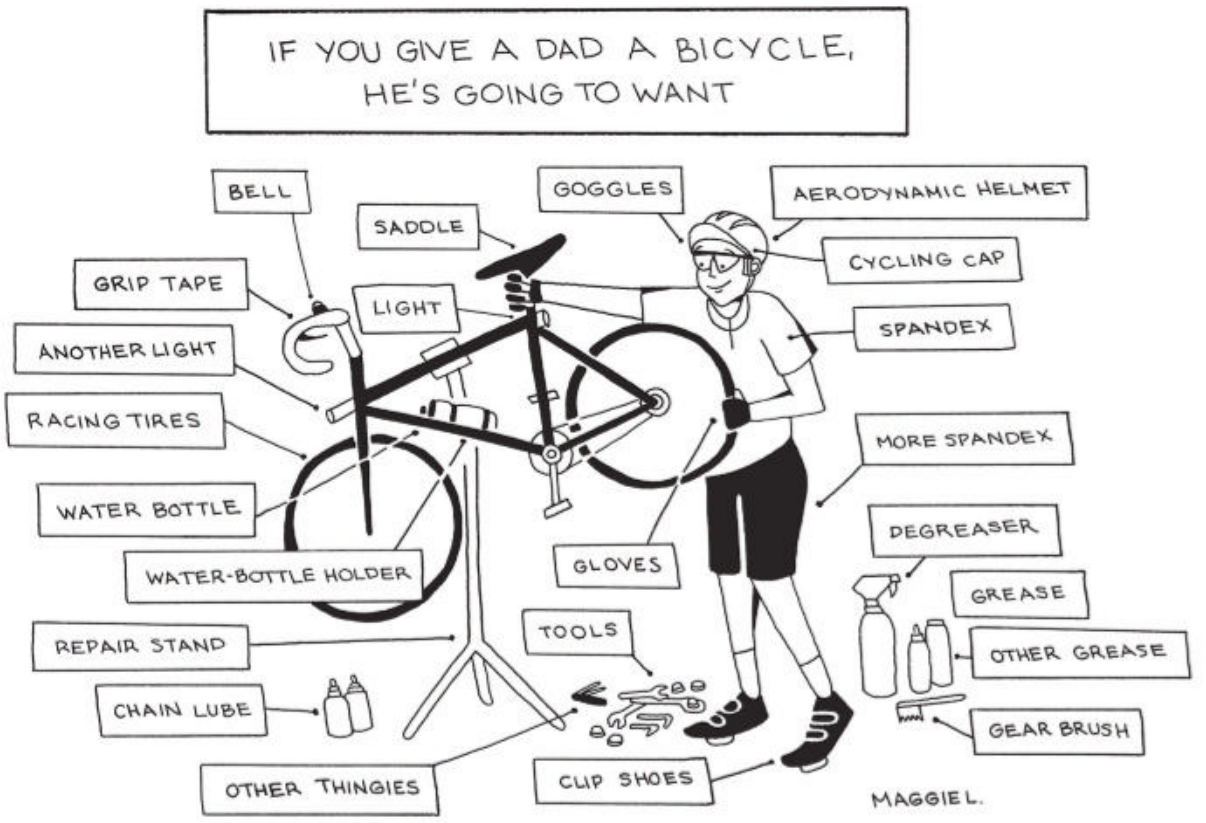
At first, she thought that some members of the family might agree with her. In a 2018 e-mail, Nicolette Getty, the third sister, described the expense and the logistics of the quarterly ritual as "distasteful." She wrote, "The trusts should become California trusts and pay the California tax that we rightfully owe." But advisers in Gordon's family office apparently disagreed, and by the following spring Nicolette was expressing a similar view. "We can live in California for now if we want to, without penalty, as long as we move out of state for a year before we are ready to access the trust principal," she wrote, in an e-mail to her siblings and others. She elaborated on the idea in a message days later, arguing that "those of us living in [California] at the time of dad's death would then make plans to move out of state for 1-2 years." (In theory, relocating could allow an heir to escape tens of millions of dollars in California's "throwback" tax, which vanishes if you move away for long enough.)

But moving away for "1-2 years" to avoid California taxes struck Sonn as a dubious charade. By the onset of the pandemic, in 2020, Kendalle and Sarah had resettled in California, and though Sonn had prospered by facilitating their juggling of geography, she now concluded that the tax strategy was becoming untenable. At one point, she texted Kendalle that "emails, texts and phone conversations go back and forth all the time inside CA, and all of those are traceable to CA, pandemic or not. We've interviewed Trust consultants at your Dad's house. I don't think we're being in integrity re: the spirit of the law." She added, "I'm compelled to tell you the truth here, even though it's an ugly shitshow and not of either of our makings."

Kendalle replied with one word: "Zoinks."

Eventually, Sonn wore out her welcome. In January, 2021, Sarah fired her from ASG Investments, but she offered to work out a severance package, signing off, "I love you." Sonn asked for a payout of about $2.5 million plus a year's salary. "That seems fair," Sarah replied. But days later Sarah sent a blistering criticism, in which she said that an employment lawyer was "appalled" by Sonn's proposed terms. "I now don't trust you in any regard," she wrote. By the end of the year, Kendalle had fired Sonn, too. She had agreed to give her $2.5 million, in installments, but she stopped after the first payment; she said the family office had discouraged her from sending more.

The following spring, Kendalle and KPG Investments filed suit in Nevada state court, alleging that Sonn had



breached her fiduciary duties and deceived her client into agreeing to the bonus. In May, Sonn filed suit in the Eastern District of New York against her former clients and employers, as well as others involved. According to the Los Angeles *Times*, the Gettys' battle with their former financial adviser could "serve as a roadmap for California tax investigators, should they choose to follow the route."

The legal survival of a multimillion-dollar tax dodge can hinge on minutiae. Auditors have been known to examine not only what state you claimed to call home but also where you swiped your gym card, the locations of your social-media posts, and where you keep your most treasured belongings—an examination known in the industry as the "Teddy-bear test." To gauge what investigators might think of the approach laid out in Sonn's suit, I interviewed five tax lawyers. They said the final tax bill would likely rest on subtle facts—for instance, how much trust business was done in California, or whether the beneficiaries moved away with plans to return.

Darien Shanske, a law professor at U.C. Davis, characterized the Gettys' approach as "aggressive, obnoxious tax planning," saying, "They are at the limit, or perhaps beyond the limit." But the family's larger strategy, he told me, might be simply to take their chances with California's version of the I.R.S., the Franchise Tax Board. The F.T.B., like many agencies, has a finite capacity for complex cases, especially when faced with a well-resourced litigant. "They're probably guessing that, in the unlikely event that the F.T.B. challenges them, it may well lose, thanks to their preparatory work—or that, faced with this work and the legal uncertainties, it'll just decide to settle." Leberman, the trust administrator, told me that the "major portion" of work was kept "outside the State of California," and that the family intends to "fulfill any and all tax obligations." In Shanske's view, this is a slender pledge; fulfilling narrowly conceived legal obligations, while avoiding taxes in a state so closely associated with the Getty family, undermines their claim to social responsibility. "There's a price schedule that we set amongst ourselves as a polity," he said. "And they decided they want to pay less."

Spend enough time around wealth managers and their clients and you can start to see the whole story of American power and suffering as a function of the simple arithmetic of compounding—of money making money, of lobbyists layering on new exemptions each decade, of the cultural amnesia that makes ideas about wealth come to seem normal, honorable, inevitable. In private moments, even Old Paul Getty marvelled at his drive to accumulate. "I don't know why I continue to be active in business," he wrote in his diary in 1952, four decades after he first tried to retire. "Force of habit, I suppose."

What motivates those who already have so much to strategize so hard to have a little more? Greed is not always about money for money's sake. For some, it's power. ("The prize of the general is not a bigger tent but command," Oliver Wendell Holmes said.) For others, cheating on your taxes is a nihilistic triumph. ("That makes me smart.") For more than a few, it's about fear. Luke Weil, an heir to a gambling-industry fortune, once told a documentarian that the prospect of losing his inheritance haunted him like the threat of "losing a parent or a sibling."

The deepest motive may be even more primal, an innate appetite for status. "If you measure the blood levels of the chimp on top of the hierarchy, they tend to have high serotonin and testosterone levels, which are mood-enhancing," Harrington, the sociologist, said. Putting that in human terms, she continued, "If you don't preserve the wealth enough so that the intermarriage and education and status-maintenance activities continue, then you're also letting the institution crumble." Perpetuity, after all, is priceless. "The fortune is the monument you build to yourself," she said. (For those who are truly mortality-avoidant, there is the personal-revival trust, a fund geared to clients who plan to be cryogenically frozen and want to be assured of coming back in comfort.)

In their current condition, taxes on American wealth are, effectively, on the honor system, with opt-outs for the flagrantly defiant. Could it be different? In recent years, the highest-profile ideas have been wealth taxes, such as Senator Warren's proposal for a two-per-cent annual levy on fortunes greater than $50 million, and an extra one per cent above a billion. Critics say that the idea fails to distinguish trustafarians from entrepreneurs, and that people will cheat—though we don't usually abandon speed limits just because speeders will speed.

Other ideas have received less attention. In 2021, Democrats proposed to narrow the angel-of-death loophole, ex-

pand the estate tax, impose a billionaires' income tax, and eliminate some of the most popular trusts, including the GRAT. But lobbyists mobilized, reviving some of the same arguments that gutted the estate tax, and by Christmas the exemptions had been saved. "Closing the loopholes is not rocket science," Lord, the Arizona lawyer, said. "All you need is a couple of bought-off senators."

Still, the perversities of the tax code have become so glaring that even some of their most devoted protectors suspect that change is coming. Blum, the Texas lawyer, lamented in the seminar last year that Congress had "shined a spotlight on many of the best tools in our toolbox that we use to avoid estate tax." He warned, "Now that the general public is aware, there is a growing outcry to shut down these benefits. This is a wake-up call that, sooner or later, the tax landscape will likely drastically change."

Many of the ideas for reform converge around the need to prevent the re-feudalization of American wealth—the Spartan scenario, which early Americans fought so hard to prevent. For the moment, restoring real taxes on what we leave behind could be more politically viable than levying a wealth tax. Instead of colliding with American myths about the pursuit of success, such taxes could tap into Americans' ambivalence about inherited riches. Some proponents suggest a federal rule against perpetuities, to impose a universal ban on dynasty trusts. Others suggest stronger financial incentives for whistleblowers. "Governments have limited budgets, the stuff is complicated, and the advisers know what's going on," McCaffery said. "They know where the bodies are buried."

In one of my conversations with Sonn, I asked why more people from her rarefied wing of financial services didn't speak out. "Anybody who is within the industry, and has been there a long time, has accepted certain tenets," she said. "Climate change is an 'externality.' Social injustice, and the various social crises that we're experiencing right now, would be considered 'externalities.' And they're actually mandated by corporate law to say, 'You cannot think about the externalities. You have to think about the profit first.'"

Sonn told me she didn't know anyone else in finance who had publicly criticized a client or the underlying assumptions of the business. "There's an unspoken omertà," she said. People "become engaged in the wrongdoing themselves. So they're able to enforce a certain kind of culture of silence around bad behavior." Sonn had started out in wealth management determined to help people find "tax-efficient" ways of clearing their conscience but had come to see an ethical flaw in that ambition. "The financial-services industry lives between the letter of the law and the spirit of the law," she said. "That's what tax efficiency *is*."

Sarah Getty insisted that the sisters had acted in accordance with their family's values. "Everything we were trying to do was lawful," she said. "I'm not against paying taxes at all, because I think they're very important, especially if they go in the right things. I would want the right government to be in control, though, because, if the wrong government is in control, then they go to all the stuff I don't support. I'm very against military and guns and weapons, and very pro-planet." Like many others I spoke to while reporting on Sonn's dispute with the Gettys, Sarah described a feeling of captivity to industries and laws that enriched her but tried her conscience. Nicolette told me, "This Nevada trust arrangement was made before I became a trustee or was included in the trust or Getty matters at all." She went on, "I'll admit that for a time I did

consider the option of moving out of California in order to avoid the tax, because it is quite substantial." But, she said, she abandoned the idea, and expects to pay about $30 million in taxes on her share of the trust. "I'm one who thinks the tax burden needs to be higher on the wealthy such as myself and my family," she said. Her sister Kendalle, who declined to comment for this article, is fond of retweeting posts by Bernie Sanders: "Billionaires get richer & pay less in taxes while millions are unemployed, kids go hungry, veterans sleep on the street. We must stand up to the billionaire class and create an economy for all, not just a few."

Sarah has experienced the dispute as a personal betrayal. "I've learned that you can't even trust the people you hire," she told me. Sonn, too, seemed bruised by the experience. In her suit, she accused her former patrons of threatening to ruin her professional reputation if she went ahead with the case. If the case eventually settles, it isn't clear what she might win or lose. In some places, whistleblowers who allege tax fraud can receive financial rewards from the state, but there is no such provision in California. And there isn't much of a market for a disgruntled wealth manager.

"My career in finance is over," Sonn said. I asked what her parents made of that. She gave a wan laugh and said, "I fulfilled a lot of their intergenerational ambitions." She had reached the heights of wealth management, optimized her position, and sued in pursuit of millions. Viewed from a certain angle, it was a capitalist fairy tale. When the Pleiades Trust opens, each of the sisters can expect to receive at least $300 million, minus whatever taxes their office does not succeed in avoiding. Sonn, whether or not she obtains the rest of her payout, will have made millions of dollars from her association with the Gettys. One wealth manager told me that it would have been unusual for Sonn to spend eight years as "a slave to these prima-donna girls, without the expectation that there's something at the end of the rainbow."

Sonn said she had come to believe that, unless wealthy Americans made some sacrifices to undo the stagnation of social mobility, stories like hers would become impossible: "My parents came here imagining that they could build a better life, and I am a product of that. And I think that some of what we're experiencing is that window has been closing for the last ten or twenty years."

But, despite the dispute, Sonn blamed her former clients less than their enablers in finance and politics. Loopholes, like dynasties, do not survive without good help. Why didn't reform work? I asked. She thought for a moment and said, "The system will always do whatever it can to preserve itself." ♦

PROFILES

A RAUCOUS ASSAULT

How the Iranian American artist Tala Madani sees men—and women.

BY CALVIN TOMKINS

For the first eight years of her life as an artist, Tala Madani, who was born in Tehran, painted only men, and not to their credit. "Caked," in 2005, shows a brawny, nearly featureless oaf in a black undershirt smashing a cake in another oaf's face. Next came a series of small paintings of men with plants growing out of their crotch—one of them tends to his foliage with a watering can. In 2011, she painted several men whose testicles hung from their chin, and a man in spirited conversation with his vital organs, which have been removed and placed in a comfortable chair. A series of 2015 paintings present men whose colossal, firehose penises take on lives of their own. None of these images suggest animosity toward the male species. The harmless dopes in Madani's early work gave way to middle-aged, potbellied, bearded losers, whose weird plights make us laugh. Madani is that rarity in art, a wildly imaginative innovator with a gift for caricature and visual satire, and her first great subject was the absurdity of machismo. "I do think machismo is healthy and alive everywhere, and I was having fun upending it," she told me last summer, when we began a number of conversations. "You know, you want it to grow bigger, so why not water it?"

Madani, who turned forty-one in December, left Iran with her mother and moved to this country in 1994, when she was twelve, and she now lives with her husband and their two children in Los Angeles, where her first major museum show in the United States is on view (until February 19th), at the Museum of Contemporary Art. I went through the show with her in October, enjoying her candid, funny, and often self-deprecating comments on individual works and on the exhibition itself. "I wanted all these images, but I kept wondering whether the works would look better if there were fewer of them," she said. "It's supposed to be this great event, to show your work, but what does that mean? Looking is the thing, not showing." Her doubts had largely subsided by the time I arrived, and her high-spirited, ebullient personality was in full flower. She radiated energy—talking rapidly, laughing often, and using both hands to rake back her abundant, shoulder-length dark hair. I asked her about the show's title, "Biscuits," which appears, in her cursive handwriting, on the catalogue's cover and on the wall at the entrance to the exhibition. "My kids were around one day when we were installing, and they were saying 'biscuits' over and over," she said. (Her daughter, Imra, is seven; Imra's brother, Roshan, is four.) "The show's title is non-threatening in the way I want the paintings to be, and, you know—it's biscuits, everything is O.K. I'm really happy with it."

Madani is acutely aware that her exhibition coincides with the political crisis in Iran, which erupted in September when a twenty-two-year-old woman named Mahsa Amini died in police custody after being arrested for wearing her head scarf improperly. Madani's feelings for the country of her birth are heartfelt and complex. "The disappointment and pain that I feel for the failures of the Iran government to simply do what is needed to serve the population of Iran is too deep," she told me. She follows the situation in Iran closely via the Internet, news outlets, Telegram, and the comments of Iranians on the street who are calling for change. She also posts information every day on her own Instagram account, which has more than twenty-one thousand followers. Privately, she longs to connect more directly with the people there.

The two curators who installed "Biscuits," Rebecca Lowery, an associate curator at MOCA, and Ali Subotnick, an independent curator who has seen Madani's career develop from the outset, both told me that Madani had been a fiercely active collaborator. "She was very hands-on," Lowery said. "Maybe a little more so than other artists. We had disagreements at times, which were healthy and productive and sometimes frustrating." "Everything was a negotiation," Subotnick recalled. "She's tenacious, persistent, and so, so curious." The exhibition opens with "The New Landscape," a fifteen-foot-wide image of a nude male figure lying face down, with his legs splayed out on both sides. The man's testicles are where they're supposed to be, and are clearly visible to us and to the five much smaller people whom Madani has placed in the foreground, holding up offerings as though to a deity. In spite of the testicles, she said, some viewers read the image as feminine—maybe because of all the Mother Nature references in art—and this makes her wonder if she should do it over. Madani often repaints an image, with changes. The first version of this painting, in 2017, was several feet wider. Its owner did not respond to MOCA's requests to borrow it, so Madani painted another, which she made slightly smaller, to fit the space.

There are a hundred and thirty-six works in the show. Some are small, less than two feet square; these tend to be lushly painted, with thick impasto and bravura brushwork. The larger ones are more thinly painted, and more abstract. Since 2007, Madani has made brief, stop-motion animations, and many of them are also on view, a few on monitors in galleries of paintings and the rest in a room of their own. The exhibition is not hung chronologically—a wise decision, because Madani's work is not sequential. What interests her, she told an interviewer, is "art that excavates from the psyche,

"I think coming to America was what made me an artist," Madani says. "I didn't have any friends, I was bored."

PHOTOGRAPH BY AMY HARRITY

not the frontal lobe, not the intellectual, not the speakable, but the unspeakable." I was reminded of this comment in a gallery where several of her "Pussy" paintings were on view. "Abstract Pussy" (2013) shows a prepubescent girl in a striped skirt, sitting on the ground with her knees pulled up and her legs apart, and four minuscule, presumably male figures who have crawled in for a closer look at her exposed vagina. (She is not wearing underpants.) Why is this image funny? I'm not sure, but it is. The girl is guileless, and the tiny men are clueless—for them, this appears to be an educational experience, not a sexual one.

The "Pussy" paintings were Madani's reaction to hearing herself referred to as "the one who paints men." "When people think they know what you do, they don't look anymore," she said. She had tried to address the problem in 2013 with her Peter and Jane paintings. As a child in Iran, Madani had learned rudimentary English from the immensely popular Peter and Jane books, published in England since the nineteen-sixties, in which two atrociously well-behaved siblings are shown engaging in instructive activities. (In the United States, a similar series was devoted to Dick and Jane.) Madani's idea was to use Peter and Jane as models for a group of paintings, but she "could not make my brush do this thing," as she recalled. She eventually paid several art students to paint Peter and Jane figures for her. That led to her making silk-screen prints of the pair, copied from the books, and using these, with alterations and different backgrounds, for paintings of her own. Several of her Peter and Jane paintings are in the MOCA show. In one, the siblings trim a Christmas tree with doll-size versions of Madani's bearded, pot-bellied men. In another, Peter pushes a demonic-looking figure on a swing.

Madani's "Pussy" series began with a rough sketch that Madani says she also based on Jane. There is something disturbing about this child, who displays her private parts so freely. Does she know what she's doing? Her smile is playful, and somewhat mischievous. Madani had her original sketch transferred to a silk screen, and variations of the vagina-flaunting charmer appeared in a dozen or more of her paintings during the next few years. One of these, "Prism Pussy" (2019), which is in the MOCA show, is larger scale, and rendered in Madani's lush, Abstract Expressionist manner. A similarly posed girl also stars in a 2017 Madani animation called "Sex Ed by God." The plot here is simple. A pair of pink lips in a moving cloud of light (the Almighty, we assume) give whispered instructions on cunnilingus to a man and a young boy. ("Not too fast . . . Be present . . . Find her clit and never let it go.") Pussy appears, larger than the man or the boy. She reaches out, takes man, boy, and moving lips in one hand, and tucks them away in her vagina. The End.

Other characters weave their way in and out of the MOCA exhibition. The icon known as Smiley made its first appearance in a 2008 semi-abstract painting of seven men, each of whom holds up to his face a copy of the familiar yellow circle bearing two dots for eyes and a half-circle mouth. In other evocations, the Smiley image is projected onto people's faces or hovers above them, or descends on them in the form of yellow-gold urine ("Piss Smiley"). "The fact that Smiley has no nose was interesting to me," Madani explained. "He can't smell anything. He can't hear anything. He can just smile."

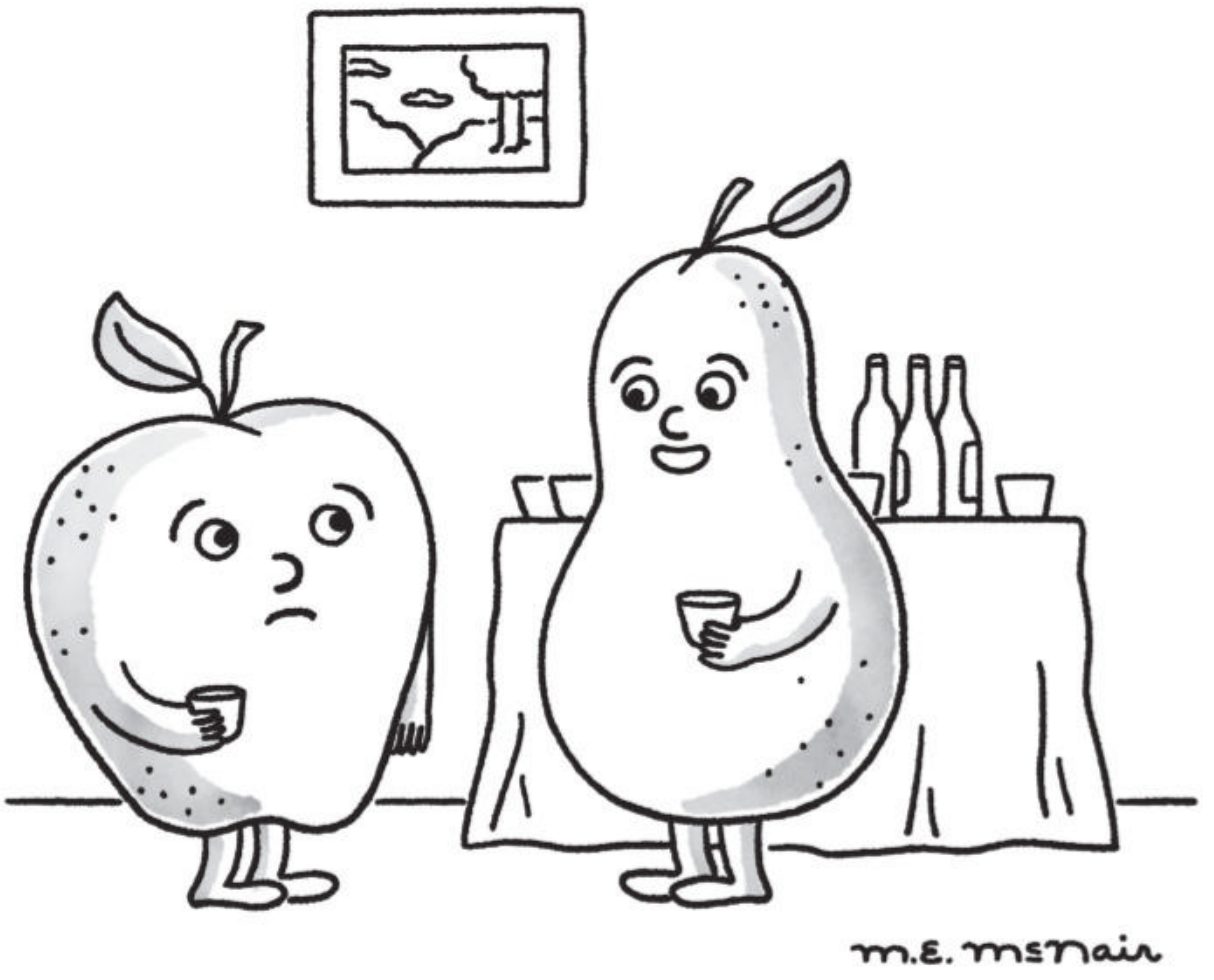
Another gallery in the exhibition is devoted mainly to Madani's penis paintings, in which the male organ functions as a giant protagonist. One

of them fills the open doorway to a dark room in a painting called "The Guest." In "Son Down," a man-child gazes in wonder at his enormous member, which occupies the space in front of him and rises to form an arch above his head. "O" shows one of Madani's bald, black-bearded men hugging his tumescent penis as it spills copious quantities of white paint on the floor beside him. "He's kind of loving his very big dick," Madani observed. "And I'm giving him the space to enjoy it."

Madani didn't really solve the problem of painting women until 2019, when her "Shit Mom" paintings arrived. "Abstract Pussy" was a silk-screened image transferred to canvas, but Shit Mom is all Madani, and I can't imagine anyone else inventing her. She figures prominently in "Biscuits." The shit in her case is not a figure of speech; she is composed of what looks like dark-brown, soft, dripping excrement. She first appeared eight months after the birth of Roshan. Madani had given herself wholly to motherhood during those months, and when she came back to the studio she had no idea what to do. "I thought, I'll paint a mother and child, just to get it out of my system," she told me. She did a painting of a mother and two small children, and had planned to hang it in her bathroom. "But it was so awful, so cliché and kitsch, that I couldn't stand it even there," she said. "So I started wiping it off, smearing the mother away. The children were still pristine, but the mother became quite shitty-looking, and I thought, Wait a second, where did that come from? It's Shit Mom!" Madani firmly denies that Roshan's birth had anything to do with the "Shit Mom" paintings, but I find this hard to believe. She has also said that when she started them she was "thinking about my own phobias of failing as a parent."

There are more than forty paintings of this strange, tragicomic figure, eight of which are in the MOCA show. We see Shit Mom in many different guises: tenderly washing the blond hair of a baby girl who looks very much like Imra; standing thigh-deep in blue water; lying on the ground while four babies touch her and eat pieces of her. Why this is not revolting, or even disagreeable, is beyond me. The beauty of the brushwork and the virtuoso modulation of color and surface must have something to do with it. Whatever the reason, I don't know of anyone who has been seriously offended by Shit Mom—not publicly, anyway. "There was really not much criticism," Madani said. "I wish there had been more."

We had been in the museum for two hours. Before leaving, I wanted to take another look at the video about Shit Mom that Madani had made in 2020. It's just under eight minutes, longer than most of her animations. The setting is the interior of a lavishly furnished house that Madani had seen in a book and rephotographed. Shit Mom, who is naked and alone, goes from room to room, touching things and sitting briefly on chairs or sofas, and everything she touches receives a dark-brown stain. There is a soundtrack of birdsong. In the formal dining room, her hand leaves a wide, continuous smear on all four walls. She sits on a couch and tries to masturbate, but fails—her body is too insubstantial. She beats her head against a marble tabletop. In another room, she finds a white cloth and uses it to wipe away the stains, but it makes them worse. At this point I felt, for the second time that day, a rather puzzling sense of sadness. When I told Madani about this, she said, "Yes, the sympathy thing. You can feel sorry for her. I don't." And then, moments later, "Sometimes I don't really understand my own practice."



"I auditioned for a part in a veggie medley, and I've got a really good feeling about it."

• •

Tala Madani was born in 1981, two years after the revolution that ended the monarchy of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. Hopes for a liberal democratic government in Iran were crushed when the Ayatollah Khomeini seized power and imposed a harsh Shi'ite regime, but Madani, an only child in a well-to-do, secular family, remembers her early years as being happy. She lived with her parents in a Tehran building that her paternal grandfather, a successful entrepreneur, had constructed for his four children and himself, with separate apartments for each of them. "My grandfather was extremely influential for me," she said. "He was like the Godfather, the center." According to Madani, the year she was born a paper company that her grandfather owned was confiscated by the regime, after publishing an advertisement that showed a nude woman covered almost entirely by paper napkins. He spent six months in jail for that offense, but quickly regained his Godfather standing afterward.

His son Alireza, Madani's father, worked for his father's company. He married an upper-middle-class Iranian woman named Mojgan. After Tala's parents divorced (she was eight at the time), the court decreed that she would live with her father—the usual procedure in Iran, with its patriarchal traditions—and Mojgan moved out. For the next four years, Tala lived with her father and spent the Iranian one-day weekends, Friday, with her mother. "Fortunately, I loved school, and reading was a big part of my life, especially history and Runi mythology," she told me. "My mom, who was very smart and good at mathematics, immediately got a job in the national oil industry. I was really happy when she and my dad divorced, because I knew the marriage wasn't working." There were all-night parties at her father's apartment, which Tala was allowed to stay up for and observe. On her birthday, there were strobe lights and a hanging disco ball and her dad as the d.j.

Her mother decided to move to the United States. An uncle of hers taught in the business school at Western Oregon University, and Mojgan enrolled there as a graduate student, working toward a master's degree in computer-science education. Early in 1994, she returned to Tehran and, with Alireza's consent, took Tala to live with her in Oregon. Alireza planned to follow them as soon as he could get a visa, but that proved to be more difficult than he expected: Iranian students could obtain approval to study abroad, but, for an adult male, permission to go to the Great Satan was a different story: it took Alireza nineteen years to get his exit visa. (He could not be reached for comment.)

For Tala, the move from a city of six million people to Monmouth, Oregon, a town of six thousand, where the university is situated, was not as disruptive as it might have been. She had grown up watching American movies and absorbing American pop culture. But in Oregon, where people shopped at megastores like Home Depot, she was homesick for Iran. "I never felt more Iranian than when I came to America," she told me. She missed her father, her grandparents, and her extended family. Madani was

Madani's "Bouquet" (2006). Her first great subject was the absurdity of machismo.

in the eighth grade in public school, and she didn't know enough English to keep up. One of her teachers, seeing how intelligent she was, gave her English lessons after school. But what really got her through those first years in Oregon was drawing. Her mother had taken her to private art classes in Tehran, and Tala had decided very early that this was what she wanted to do. "But I think coming to America was what made me an artist," Madani told me. "I didn't have any friends, I was bored, and I just drew and drew and drew. I kept on doing it all the way through high school, even after my English was fine. My mom really encouraged it. We lived above a teriyaki restaurant, in an apartment with just one bedroom, and we survived on her part-time teaching salary."

At Oregon State University, in Corvallis, which Madani entered in 1999 on a full scholarship, she double-majored in art and political science. Her interest in political science was fuelled by thoughts of returning to Iran, where the government's hard-line policies had brought increasing economic and social misery. She knew that many Iranians were suffering and dreamed of going there somehow. A fellow-student at Oregon State, whom she had a tremendous crush on, urged her to forget political science and concentrate on painting, but Madani couldn't do that. She was convinced that art, much as she loved it, would never provide the independent life that she wanted for herself. For a long time, she told me, she had one foot in art and the other in Iran.

Her painting teacher at Oregon State, Shelley Jordon, thought she was born to paint. "I could see immediately how smart she was, how capable, and how ambitious," Jordon told me last fall. "She came into the class not knowing how to paint, but she learned very quickly. There was never a question about her being the real thing." Jordon, who grew up in New York, had studied painting there with Philip Pearlstein, and she kept in touch with the New York art scene. When Madani and a few of her student friends visited New York annually on Thanksgiving weekends, Jordon gave her lists of galleries and museum shows that she should see. "I hadn't met anybody who took painting that seriously, and her severity was very exciting," Madani remembers. When I asked Madani to describe her own painting in those years, she was scathing: "The backs of people who had been lashed, to talk about what was happening in Iran." She also painted several portraits of Donald Rumsfeld, as well as thumbnails of Iranians with hangman's nooses over them—"cliché reactions to the politics in Iran. They weren't caricatures yet. It was just basically bad painting. I had a studio mate, a Belgian painter, who would come in and say, 'Tala, this is awful. These are so bad. These are not art.'"

Madani graduated from Oregon State in 2004, after spending her senior year in Berlin. Her studies in political science had led to an internship at the German Council on Foreign Affairs, where she did research on issues of immigration and integration. "The work we did seemed lengthy and ineffective," she said. It didn't keep her from visiting most of the important museums in Western Europe, though, travelling by train with a former classmate she had known at Oregon State, and who was living in Spain at the time. They went to Florence, Venice, and Rome, absorbing "all the art history we had been studying and sticking to the classics." She also visited Tehran, for the first time since she and her mother moved to Oregon. The city seemed bigger and busier than she remembered. She spent time with her father and her grandparents, "but I felt very insecure there," she said. "In Germany, where I barely spoke

© TALA MADANI; PHOTOGRAPH BY FREDRIK NILSEN

the language, I felt secure biking at 3 A.M. in dark neighborhoods, but not in Tehran."

Before leaving Oregon, Madani had applied to ten graduate art schools. About half of them accepted her, including Yale, her first choice. "Yale changed everything," she said. "I recognized what painting can do and can't do, and how humor can come in to do magic for things that are just coarse." The artist Peter Halley, who was the director of graduate studies in painting at Yale then, remembers Madani as the best example of the learning curves that he looks for in a student. "I wasn't blown away by her paintings when she arrived, but she kept getting better," he told me. "Very quickly, she developed this incredible hand, a kind of calligraphic brushstroke, which in conjunction with her controversial or elusive subject matter really appealed to me." To Madani, having Halley, and the painters Catherine Murphy, Kurt Kauper, Mel Bochner, and Nicole Eisenman, see and respond to her work was a revelation.

Her breakthrough came in 2005, in the summer after her first year at Yale. Students were allowed to use the studios during vacations, and Madani found a very large canvas that another student had discarded. She cleaned it off, re-stretched it, and, without any clear idea in mind, rapidly filled it with more than twenty seated figures in red clothing. A few of them had faces, but the majority did not. The semi-abstract forms, all facing the same way, suggested acolytes at a religious service. This painting, called "The House," was a turning point. "After that, I just let go of anything that I had learned academically," Madani told me. "I understood the difference between making an image of something and trying to embody something—that was the key. My paintings became much looser, without add-ons. I also became very interested in humor. It really hadn't occurred to me before—I hadn't understood humor at all." She didn't know about Mike Kelley or Paul McCarthy or other American artists who dealt with the absurd, and she had never heard of Martin Kippenberger, the German iconoclast who influenced an entire generation of European artists. She continued, "It's odd, because in Iran the way you deal with reality is through humor. There was this weekly magazine in Iran called *Gol Agha*, which my uncle used to bring home. It was all political satire and caricature, and that was the only way you could criticize the government." Nobody was making funny paintings at Yale, but that summer Madani painted "Caked," and plunged gleefully into her raucous assault on machismo.

Other students and all her teachers noticed the change in her work. "Her humor was crude and unavoidable," the artist Ella Kruglyanskaya told me. "She was like a different painter." (Madani and Kruglyanskaya, who grew up in Latvia, bonded for life at Yale; they still talk to each other by telephone regularly.) Catherine Murphy said, "To watch her find a language was miraculous. There was a knife in each bit of humor, and not many people have managed to do that." (Daumier, Hogarth, George Cruikshank, and the other great caricaturists of art history were all men.) In 2006, the year Madani graduated from Yale, her cake paintings were shown at Oregon State, her alma mater. A year later, she had a solo show (of cake men and crotch plants) at Lombard Freid Projects, in New York, and the *Times* critic Roberta Smith gave it a glowing review: "Her works assert that the political is not only personal, painterly and painful but also deeply, affectingly comical. . . . This terrific show stirs optimism about the future of painting."

Madani painted all the time, morning and night, but she still balked at committing herself to a career in art. "Tala always downplayed the artist thing," Kruglyanskaya said. "She kept it at a distance—if painting didn't work out, she would go into politics." "I'm never honest with myself about my relationship to art," Madani confessed, in one of our conversations. "I almost feel that, if I admit to painting that I love it, it will leave me. Somehow this distance is very important to the kind of work I'm making."

After Yale, feeling that she needed more time to figure things out, Madani applied for two artist residencies and got both of them. The first was at the Fine Arts Work Center in Provincetown, on Cape Cod. She did the paintings for her next show at Lombard Freid there, and one of the residents taught her how to make stop-motion animations, which became an important part of her practice. The second residency was a two-year stint at the Rijksakademie, in Amsterdam. Candidates for the Rijks, which is famously hard to get into, are required to go there for a preliminary interview, and on the day she went she met another applicant, a British artist named Nathaniel Mellors. "I was twenty-four and he was thirty-one," she said. "He had gone to the Royal College of Art, so his art education was very different from mine, and more focussed on video and contemporary art." Madani was accepted immediately for the Rijks residency, but Mellors was put on a waiting list.

Madani made a second trip back to Iran at this time. She sat in on a large family conference that her paternal grandfather had organized, to help members of the extended family with any business problems they might have. The family's elder statesman and godfather, now in his eighties, was still active and dominant, a bon vivant whom no one could suppress. For Madani, though, family issues were not the problem. What weighed on her mind was the treatment of women in Iran. "Women are second-class citizens there, in terms of inheritance laws, divorce laws, and not being counted as equal to men when testifying in court," she said to me. "The Islamic Republic has defined itself in opposition to Western values, and much of its identity is based on controlling women."

When Mellors learned that he'd been put on the waiting list at the Rijksakademie, he asked if "the Iranian girl" had got in. A few weeks later, his application was accepted. He looked up Madani, and they quickly became friends. "During introductions, when all the residents were showing their work to one another, I remember him laughing out loud when I showed my things," Madani said. "He found my paintings really funny. His work was fresh, beyond the scope of my experience, so to me he was the future. He still is. Nathaniel's work is not media-specific. It defies definition. He plays

with sculpture and music and film, and with standup comedy." When they met, Mellors was in a relationship with a woman in London, but he and Madani fell in love. During their second year at the Rijksakademie, Mellors broke up with his London girlfriend, and he and Madani moved in together.

They stayed in Amsterdam for a few months after finishing the residency. Madani found a studio in a former morgue, where the atmosphere was so dismal that she couldn't paint. She developed a thyroid disease, and went back to Oregon for medical treatment. While there, she applied for American citizenship, but after she showed excitement over the election of Barack Obama, she recalls noticing a change in the person processing her case. Her citizenship application was denied and her green card, which had made it possible for her to travel and to reside in the United States, was placed under review. "I called Nathaniel and said, 'Honey, I'm having green-card problems and I'm stuck in Oregon for a while.' We had been together for a year and a half, and it could have fizzled out at that point, but instead he moved to Oregon. We rented a house on the beach in Newport, and I painted and he wrote film scripts and made sculptures and ran on the beach, and at night we watched films on Netflix—Nathaniel knew a lot about cinema and film theory, so it was an education for me." On their first date, they watched Pier Paolo Pasolini's "Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom."

After nine months on the Oregon coast, Madani got her green card back (she became a citizen soon afterward), and she and Mellors returned to Amsterdam. They had a lot of friends there, but they decided that Holland was not the right place for them. Madani's work was appearing in important museum shows in New York and elsewhere. She was in the New Museum's 2009 triennial exhibition, "The Generational: Younger Than Jesus" ("Her small, yet powerfully ribald paintings stood out amid a surplus of chilly conceptualism," the Los Angeles *Times* reported), and in 2013 her breakthrough work, "The House," was in a solo show at the Moderna Museet, in Sweden. Her third show at Lombard Freid that year, called "Pictograms," featured alphabet pictures with people's bodies forming the letters, and some new, disturbing animations. (In "Hospital," a baby crawls up onto a hospital bed and beats its tiny hands on the sheet-covered patient until the sheet is saturated with blood.) Madani and Mellors thought seriously of moving to New York, but they were put off by the soaring cost of living in the city. Los Angeles was considerably cheaper then, and they moved there in 2010.

Although Madani and Mellors had been engaged for three years, they were still unmarried. They knew that they wanted children, though, and in 2015, when Madani found that she was pregnant, they discussed getting married. The plan was to do it in Turkey, where Mellors was researching Neanderthal history at an excavation site called Gobekli Tepe. (His short, comic film "The Sophisticated Neanderthal Interview" premièred at the Hammer Museum, in Los Angeles, in 2014.) Political tensions at the border between Turkey and Syria made travel difficult, however, so she and Mellors were married in a secular service at a church near Los Angeles. Tala's mother came, and so did her father, who had finally been able to leave Iran the year before, and was living in Palos Verdes, an hour south of L.A. He and Tala see each other once or twice a month. Many of Madani's and Mellors's family members attended the wedding, as did a host of art-world friends (including Ali Subotnick) from Amsterdam and London and New York and Los Angeles. Imra was born four months later.

"When I eat out, I like to order something I would never make at home."

Los Angeles suits Madani and Mellors. They live a few miles north of the city, in a three-bedroom house that they renovated and moved into three years ago. The house is surrounded by lush gardens full of exotic plants and uninvited wild peacocks,

which perch on the roof and strut around like landlords. (The species is not native to the area; someone must have brought a pair and turned them loose.) Five or six of the birds were in evidence when I came for lunch after the "Biscuits" show. Madani showed me an iPhone video of a black bear and its cub, also uninvited, that came in through their fence recently and stayed for a while. California can be more feral than you think. Lunch was abundant: two very good cheeses, fresh bread, and a tasty Iranian soup called Ash-e-anar, which Madani's mother, who lives nearby with her second husband, an Oregon-born financial expert whom she married twenty years ago, had made and left to simmer on the stove. Mojgan often picks up the children at school and takes care of them until Madani and Mellors return from work—they have adjoining studios in a building they own in Montecito Heights, twenty minutes from home.

I stayed on after lunch, and met Mojgan and the children. Mojgan is quieter than Tala. She has warmth and grace, and a calm but unmistakable authority. The children are friendly and talkative; they both have blond hair, which Tala says they got from their father. Nathaniel arrived a little later, and we all sat in the garden and had peppermint tea and more of the cheese and fresh fruit. Tala and Nathaniel clearly enjoy parenting. "Nathaniel is the more fun parent," Tala said. "I'm tied to a schedule." I asked Nathaniel about his family. "I was born in Doncaster, in Yorkshire," he said. "My parents were from working-class families—my dad had been a professional footballer, a goalkeeper, and my mom was a teacher. When I was fourteen, I started improvising music. I knew I wanted to make art and music." Mellors, whose multi-discipline installations have been shown at the New Museum, in New York, the 2017 Venice Biennale, the Hammer Museum, and elsewhere, uses electronic technology in much of his work.

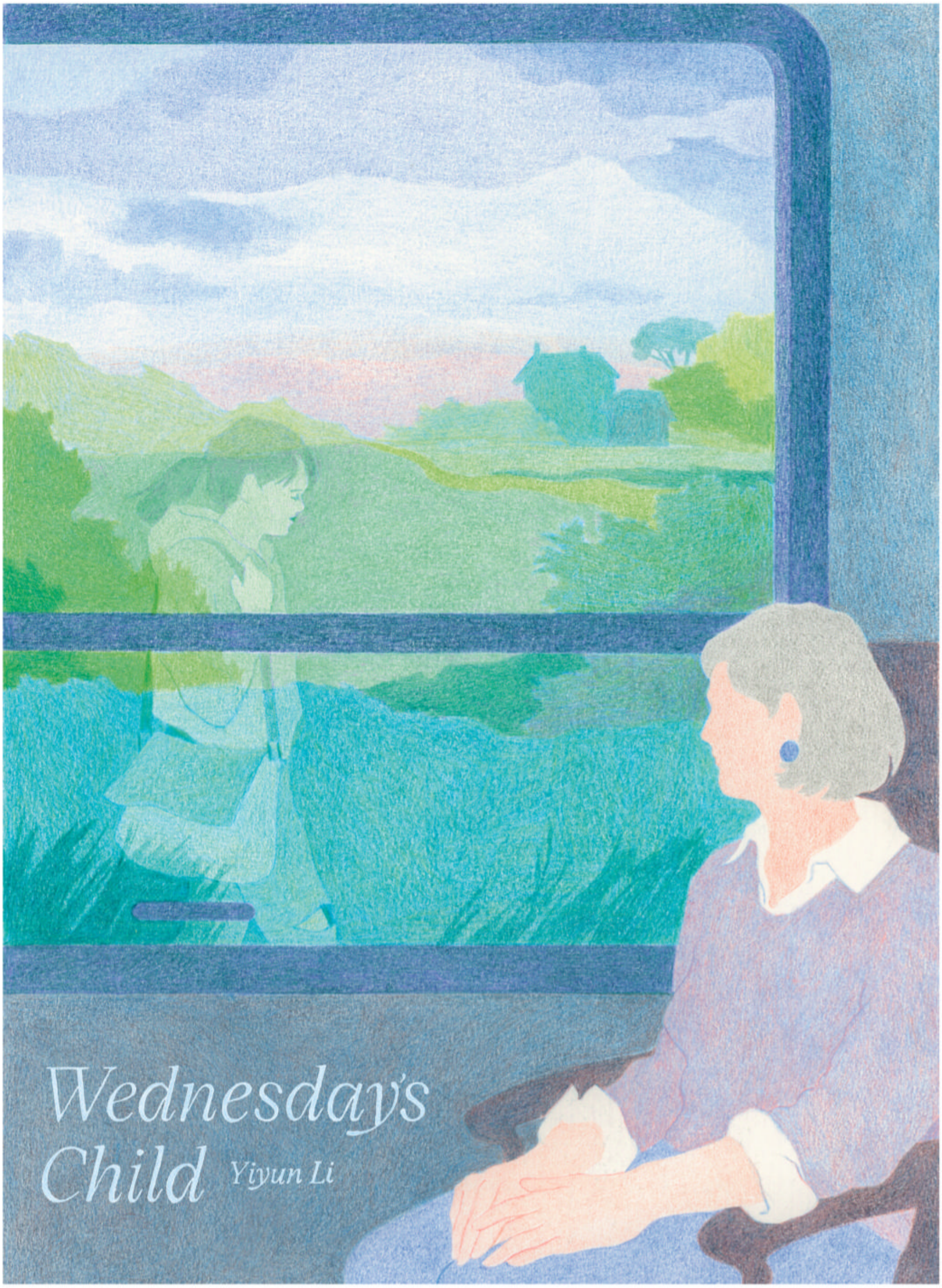
The next morning, Madani picked me up in her Tesla (she and Nathaniel each have one) and drove to her studio. We talked about the ongoing crisis in Iran. A month had passed since the death in police custody of Mahsa Amini. The nationwide protests, far from abating, were growing in strength and numbers. Young women throughout the country burned their hijabs in public, and went without them on the streets. More than two hundred protesters had been killed by the police, and thousands more had been arrested. There were daily warnings of harsher reactions by the hard-line regime, but so far the threat of mass killings had not materialized. (In subsequent months, hundreds more protesters have been killed, and four people have been executed by the state.)

"What's happening now has been incredible to watch," Madani said. "There's a new generation that's much less fearful, and it's fitting that a regime whose identity is based on controlling women's actions should be brought down by women. This has been an awakening, and it's gone beyond the point of no return." In a later conversation, she turned again to the subject. "I'm against sanctions on Iran, because they harm the people more than the government," she told me. "Sanctions just create black markets. There are more effective things to do, such as freezing individual assets and organizing strikes. But there is no underground network in Iran for this movement. Iranians have a lot of passion, but they don't have a lot of talent for organization. But I'm hopeful. I don't think Iran can go back to government as usual, because this government has lost its standing with the different structures that run the country, and with the population. There are now so many in revolt, and the numbers offer a sort of protection. It's going to get a lot worse before it gets better. It seems now that there is a total commitment to seeing this through. The reformist movement in the last decade failed, and now it's a real revolution."

The studio was larger than I expected—a single-story building with twenty-foot ceilings, nine thousand square feet of space, and a fenced-in parking lot. Madani had brought croissants, chocolate and plain, and we ate them in her part of the studio, with peppermint tea. (Iranians do like to feed you.) Several of her "Cloud Mommy" paintings, a new series she had started nine months earlier, were on the walls. There were seven in the MOCA exhibition, large paintings of blue sky with wisps or patches of white clouds in which you could make out female figures. This was a new direction for Madani. "I don't know how a cloud could come into my practice," she said. "My paintings are not about space, they're about performance. But I can't do something arbitrarily, there has to be a reason, so I guess they came from wondering how to introduce landscape into the work. And I found the female again, in the cloud." She paused, then added, "I'm in the middle of it now, sketching stuff for the next series of Cloud Mommies."

In an earlier conversation, Madani had described a group of her small paintings as "comfortable," and I asked her now what that meant. "The comfortable thing is when"—she broke off and started again. "The brush never lies, right? The brush shows you when the painter is being careful and oh so precise, kind of belaboring it, and when they're relaxed. They're holding their breath when they paint, or they're breathing. You can make an amazing painting either way. Medieval painting, and usually folk art, are the holding-the-breath kind. Salvador Dali didn't breathe at all when he painted. Dali's paintings are tight as a fist. But you could say that Matisse and Picasso are breathing through their paintings. They're very relaxed. They're comfortable."

I suggested that the cloud paintings looked pretty comfortable, and Madani agreed. Would she say the same about her life? She laughed, and threw up her hands. "I find my life quite ordinary," she said. "I *need* the ordinary at this point. It's almost like my life growing up was so extremely rich that I'm still processing it. I need the calm in order to process the strangeness. I'll tell you something else," she added. "When this revolution comes to fruition, the weight of history, of the problems present at my birth, would be lifted, and I could truly be happy just being an artist." ♦



Wednesday's Child

Yiyun Li

ILLUSTRATION BY CAMILLE DESCHIENS

The difficulty with waiting, Rosalie thought, is that one can rarely wait in absolute stillness. *Absolute stillness*?—that part of herself, which was in the habit of questioning her own thoughts as they occurred, raised a mental eyebrow. *No one waits in absolute stillness; absolute stillness is death; and when you're dead you no longer wait for anything*. No, not death, Rosalie clarified, but stillness, like hibernation or estivation, waiting for . . . Before she could embellish the thought with some garden-variety clichés, the monitor nearby rolled out a schedule change: the 11:35 train to Brussels Midi was cancelled.

All morning, Rosalie had been migrating between platforms in Amsterdam Centraal, from Track 4 to Track 10 then to Track 7 to Track 11 and back to 4. The trains to Brussels, both express and local, had been cancelled one after another. A family—tourists, judging by their appearance, as Rosalie herself was—materialized at every platform along with Rosalie, but now, finally, gave up and left, pulling their suitcases behind them. A group of young people, with tall, overfilled backpacks propped beside them like self-important sidekicks, gathered in front of a monitor, planning their next move. Rosalie tried to catch a word or two—German? Dutch? It was 2021, and there were not as many English-speaking tourists in Amsterdam that June as there had been on Rosalie's previous visit, twenty years before.

She wondered what to do next. Moving from track to track would not deliver her to the hotel in Brussels. Would cancelled trains only lead to more cancelled trains, or would this strandedness, like ceaseless rain during a rainy season or a seemingly unfinishable novel, suddenly come to an end, on a Sunday afternoon in late May or on a snowy morning in January? Years ago, an older writer Rosalie had befriended inquired in a letter about the book she was working on: "How is the novel? One asks that as one does about an ill person, and a novel that's not yet finished is rather like that. You reach the end and the thing is either dead or in much better shape. The dead should be left in peace."

A novel would not get better if the characters spent all their time wandering between platforms. What Rosalie needed was not a plot twist or a dramatic scene but reliable information. She found a uniformed railway worker and asked about the cancelled trains.

The man, speaking almost perfect English, acknowledged her dilemma with an apology. "There was an incident near Rotterdam this morning," he said.

"An incident," Rosalie repeated, though she already knew the nature of such an ambiguous term. "Was it an accident?"

"Ah, yes, the kind of sad accident that happens sometimes. A man walked in front of a train."

Rosalie noted the verb he used: not "jumped" or "ran" or "leaped," but "walked," as though the death had been an act both leisurely and purposeful. Contrary to present circumstances—it was summer; this was the twenty-first century—she imagined a man in a neatly pressed suit and wearing a hat, like Robert Walser in one of those photos from his asylum years. Walser's hat had been found next to his body in the Swiss snow, on Christmas Day, 1956. But, even if the man near Rotterdam had worn a hat, it was unlikely to be resting in peace near him.

The railway worker opened an app on his phone and indicated some red and yellow and green squares to Rosalie, reassuring her that the service would return to normal soon.

There are two types of mothers: those who have not taught their children to be kind to themselves, and those who have not learned to be kind to their children.

Really? Rosalie thought. Are you sure there are only those two types? Surely some mothers, having done a better job, fall into neither category? Rosalie did not remember writing those lines in her notebook, but they were on the same page as a couple of other notes that she had a vague memory of having written. One of them read, *You can't declutter an untimely death away;* the other consisted of two lines from a nursery rhyme: *Wednesday's child is full of woe, Thursday's child has far to go*. She must have written those lines on a Wednesday. Marcie had been born on a Wednesday, and had died on a Thursday, fifteen years and eleven months later. For a while after her death, every Thursday had felt like a milestone, and every Thursday Rosalie and Dan had left flowers at the mouth of the railway tunnel where Marcie had laid herself down to die. One week gone, two weeks gone, then three, four, five. It occurred to Rosalie that the only other time when parents count the days and weeks is when a child is newborn.

After some time, however, the counting stopped. No parent would describe a child as being seventy-nine weeks old or a hundred and three weeks old. The math for the dead must be similar. Air oxidizes, water rusts. Time, like air and water, erodes. And there are very few things in life that are impervious to time's erosion. Thursday again became just another day in the week.

Rosalie carried three notebooks in her purse, but she no longer knew her original intention for each. They had become three depositories of scribbled words in the same category, "Notes to self." It was a most lopsided epistolary relationship: whoever that self was, she was an unresponsive and irresponsible correspondent. Had Rosalie decided to address the notes to Marcie, there would have been some room for fantasy; nobody could say with certainty that the dead were not reading our minds or our letters to them. Rosalie, however, had not written to Marcie. She had written to herself, notes that she had not read until that Wednesday in June, while waiting for the disrupted Nederlandse Spoorwegen to resume.

The three notebooks read like a record of a chronic disease—not cancer but some condition so slow-building that it could hardly be distinguished from the natural progression of aging. Rosalie remembered reading a novel in which a character seeks advice from an old woman on how best to poison her husband. The most effective poison, which would go absolutely undetected, she is told, is a pear a day, sweet and juicy. A pear a day? What kind of poison is that? the woman asks. Every husband has a finite number of pears allotted to his life, the old woman says. What's wrong if he doesn't die on a specific day? There will be that final pear, which will finish him off one day.

What was the title of the novel? Rosalie tried to recollect it, and then

laughed, remembering. This was an exchange she had once sketched out, thinking that she could use it in a novel if the opportunity arose. *Are you sure you made it up*? her questioning self immediately asked. No, Rosalie could not be sure. The longer one lives, the more porous one's mind becomes, the less reliable. Perhaps Alice Munro had written a story about pears and poisons? Or, more likely, Iris Murdoch?

And you, my dear—the old woman in Rosalie's imagination says now to the woman with the mariticidal aspiration—you, too, should take a pear a day; it's a tonic that'll do you good, and it'll keep you living longer than your husband. Let that sweet and slow poison do its job properly, won't you?

Indeed, why the hurry to get in front of a moving train? Why not let a death be timely, rather than disrupting the schedule of a national rail system? Rosalie considered writing these questions down in her notebook, but they would make it sound as though she were having an argument with Marcie, or with the stranger who had died that morning. "Never argue" was Rosalie's motto; especially, never argue with the dead.

The last book—books, in fact, three novels in a single volume—that Marcie and Rosalie had discussed was Ágota Kristóf's "The Notebook Trilogy." It was not the last book Marcie had read—what that had been Rosalie would never know. The stack on Marcie's desk, at the time of her death, included a story collection by Kelly Link, the collected poems of Elizabeth Bishop, a François Mauriac novel, and a book of La Fontaine's fables. The books, like others before, had been taken from Rosalie's shelves, with or without her recommendation.

Rosalie had read the Kristóf trilogy during a cultural-exchange trip to Moscow. The narrative labyrinth of the novels had baffled her. Corridors built of metaphorical mirrors, real and fake doubles, reflections of reflections—all those devices which might fascinate or frustrate a reader, though Rosalie had felt neither fascination nor frustration. What she had wanted was to talk with someone about the novels, and so she had asked Marcie to read them.

"I can't believe you asked me to read these books," Marcie said when she had finished.

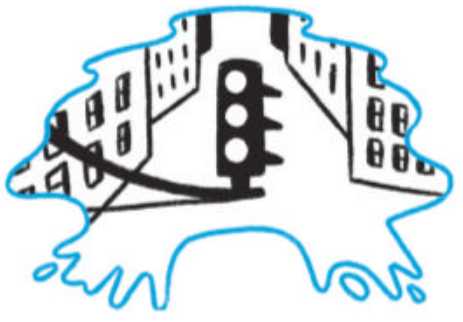
"Are they confusing?" Rosalie asked. "I was confused, too."

"Confusing? No. But they're rather, what do you call it, *graphic*."

"They're not pornography."

"They're worse than pornography." Marcie, who by middle school had become a better cook and baker than Rosalie, was carving out balls of cantaloupe with an ice-cream scoop. "I think they may have permanently destroyed my appetite."

There was plenty of violence in the trilogy: rapes, mutilations, executions. Before Marcie's remark, it had not occurred to Rosalie that the books might not be age-appropriate. In eighth grade, Marcie had quoted C. S. Lewis in her application to a highly selective prep school—"I fancy that most of those who think at all have done a great deal of their thinking in the first fourteen years"—and then gone on to catalogue all the thinking she had done. Might not this come across as a bit . . . arrogant? Rosalie had asked, and Marcie had replied that, if any of the adults dared to judge her so, it was they who were arrogant. *They*, Marcie had said, instead of *you*, thus, to Rosalie's relief, excluding her from the indictment. If those adults judged her, it meant that they had not done their share of thinking when they were young; older now, they felt they had a right to treat children like miniature poodles. "Miniature poodles, I'm telling



you!" Marcie had said with a vehement shudder. "Not even standard poodles!"

Rosalie watched Marcie arrange balls of cantaloupe, honeydew, and watermelon in a glass bowl, then squeeze half a lime over them before sprinkling some salt flakes on top. The bowl of melon was Marcie's afternoon snack. Rosalie had no idea where Marcie had acquired such a demanding standard for everyday living; she herself would have eaten a slice of melon over the sink.

"I think your appetite is going to be all right," Rosalie said.

Marcie pointed a two-pronged fork at Rosalie. "Sometimes things are *all right*, until they turn *all wrong*."

"Where did that fork come from?" Rosalie said. The fork, slender, with a pinkish metallic hue, was unfamiliar.

"I bought it. The color is called rose gold. I liked how 'rose gold' sounded."

That conversation had taken place the week before Marcie started at the prep school she had applied to with her youthful confidence. Three weeks later, during second period, she walked off the campus to a nearby railway. For some time afterward, Rosalie had replayed their conversation over the tricolored melon balls. She wondered if she had missed something that Marcie had been trying to tell her. Would rereading "The Notebook Trilogy" help her? It occurred to her that at least Marcie had known, just shy of sixteen, that the world had the potential to be as violent and bleak as something written by Ágota Kristóf. The world was not as bland and harmless as it was in those novels with long-haired girls on the covers, which had been devoured by Marcie's classmates in middle school. "OMG, I CANNOT STAND THEM. STUPID. STUPID. STUPID," Marcie had said a few times, with such passion that Rosalie could see every word in capital letters. But a girl who read those novels might not so resolutely give up all hope. There were more books with long-haired girls on the covers than had been written by Kristóf.

"Someday you should reflect on the mistakes you made. I'm not saying *now*, of course. Now may be too soon," Rosalie's mother had said on the phone a few months after Marcie's death.

"What do you mean?" Rosalie asked. Like many people, she asked that question only when she knew perfectly well what the other person meant. It was more about earning a moment for herself, like a tennis player flexing her legs, bouncing, readying herself to return a serve.

"Any time a child chooses that way out, you have to wonder what the parents did," Rosalie's mother, who refused to use the words "died" or "suicide" but was O.K. with "passed away" or "took her own life," elaborated.

It was cruel, what her mother had

said to Rosalie, but it was far from the cruellest thing she had ever said. Besides, Rosalie knew that her mother was only expressing what other people tried not to, some less successfully than others. The week after Marcie's death, the mother of one of her middle-school friends texted Rosalie, conveying her condolences and ending the exchange with "I've read that there are ways to cure adolescent depression. Didn't you guys know?"

Parenting was a trial. The lucky ones were still making a case for themselves, with cautious or blind optimism. Rosalie and Dan had received their verdict.

"Hey, honey, are you coming home from work anytime soon?"

• •

Rosalie had decided to take a trip by herself just as the Delta variant of COVID started to gain notoriety. She often travelled alone for work, but, in the past, holiday trips had belonged to the family. Dan had not questioned her decision. He was going to tear down the sunroom, which had been in a dilapidated state for some years, and his plan was to build a new sunroom during his vacation time—well, as much of it as he could; he could spend subsequent weekends on the final touches. To toil in the North Carolina heat—just thinking about it made Rosalie feel exhausted, but, since Marcie's death, Rosalie and Dan had learned that a shared pain was simply that, a permanent presence of a permanent absence in both their lives. There was no shared cure, not even a shared alleviation. There was no point in comparing the risk of her travelling during a still rampant pandemic to the risk of his injuring his back with heavy lifting under the hot sun.

One specialty of the Netherlands, for a visitor, is its picturesqueness. "What is the use of a book without pictures or conversations?" Alice asks, sensibly, before going down the rabbit hole. She might as well have asked, What is the use of a life without pictures or conversations? For a week, Rosalie took photographs of canals and windmills, of wheels of cheese and parades of blue-and-white figurines in shopwindows, of museum gardens and market stalls. Amsterdam, Delft, Utrecht, Haarlem—all were picture-perfect, just as she knew Brussels and Ghent and Bruges would be, on the next leg of her trip. Marcie would have jeered at Rosalie's behavior as a tourist; she would have quizzed Rosalie on the Benelux countries in order to demonstrate to Rosalie her ignorance of the region she so avidly photographed; Marcie would have said, "What's the use of this skimming on life's surface as though that would do the trick?"

How do you know it won't work? Rosalie would have replied; is it not the same as your baking those cookies with the perfect jam decoration? She then realized that, once again, she was back at the same argument, the one that Marcie had already and definitively won. What's the use of an argument without the promise of further arguments?

Rosalie sent the best of her travel pictures to Dan. In return, he sent photographic documentation of his progress: piles of rotten wood, pristine planks first stacked and then nailed into the right places, new windows with cardboard wrapped around the corners, paint-sample strips and cans, empty beer bottles in the garage, arranged in groups of ten, like bowling pins. Skimming was preferable to dredging a bottomless pain. Every parent who has lost a child will one day die of that chronic affliction. Why not let the sweet pears do their work?

The train to Brussels arrived. All waiting has an end point, Rosalie thought, and instantly her other self said, *All waiting*? *Surely some waiting will always remain that: waiting*.

Like what? Rosalie felt obliged to ask.

Like waiting to be contacted by an E.T., *waiting to win a Nobel Prize in Physics*, *waiting to believe in an afterlife*.

Oh, you unbending soul. Life is held together by imprecise words and inexact thoughts. What's the point of picking at every single statement persistently until the seam comes undone?

Rosalie used not to have so many quibbles with herself. Had she developed this tiresome habit because of Marcie's death? Marcie would have said right away, *Don't you dare blame anything on me*. That Rosalie had never, while Marcie was alive, given her an opportunity to speak that line—was that a comfort for either of them? Rosalie wished she had spoken a variation of the line to her own mother, though it was too late. Her mother had died two months earlier. Were there an afterlife, she would have conveyed a message to Rosalie by now, pointing out that her death and her afterlife, both being disagreeable, were Rosalie's fault, just as her life before death had been full of disappointments caused by having to be a mother to Rosalie, for whom she had abandoned her training in architecture. She had never stopped believing that she had been destined

for fame and accolades, all sacrificed for Rosalie.

Would her mother have asked Marcie to give a daughter's account of Rosalie's failures in motherhood?

Despite the earlier cancelled trains, the carriage Rosalie settled down in was not crowded. She counted a family of three, a young couple, and a few passengers travelling alone. A woman, tightly doubled-masked, looked back and forth several times, checking on each of the other passengers as though assessing the potential threat they posed, before putting herself into a seat across the aisle from Rosalie, her hands supporting her lower back. Thirty-seven or thirty-eight weeks pregnant? Maybe even forty, Rosalie estimated, looking at the imprint of the woman's navel, protruding unabashedly against her thin white maternity blouse.

Rosalie remembered learning, in a college psychology course, about how pregnant women were likely to think that, statistically, more women were getting pregnant than in the past, but that it was only a trick of their attention. Were it not for the pandemic, would Rosalie have noticed on this trip more young people about the age that Marcie would have been? After her death, a grief counsellor had explained to Rosalie and Dan that all sorts of everyday things might devastate them without warning: a hairpin, a ballpoint pen, a girl Marcie's age walking down the street, with the same hair style or in a similar dress. None of these, however, had happened to Rosalie. The whole wide world was where Marcie was not; Rosalie did not need any reminder of that fact.

Marcie would have turned nineteen on her next birthday. Immediately after her death, Rosalie had written in a notebook that her daughter would now remain fifteen forever, and she—Rosalie—would never know what Marcie would have been at sixteen, or seventeen, or twenty-six, or forty-two. What surprised Rosalie—and so few things surprised a parent after the death of a child that this realization had struck her with a blunt force; she would have called it an epiphany had she been religious, or the kind of writer who believed in epiphanies—was that, contrary to her assumption, Marcie had not stayed fifteen. Her friends had continued progressing, going through high school, and they were now about to leave for college. Marcie, too, had aged in Rosalie's mind. Not in a physically visible manner—Rosalie would never allow herself to imagine a girl who looked any different from the one she had dropped off at the school gate on the final, fatal morning. "I want you to remember the living Marcie," the funeral director had said gently on the phone, explaining his decision not to allow Rosalie and Dan to view Marcie's body before the cremation. "I don't want you to always dwell on her last moments. That's not what her life was about."

No, Marcie had not changed physically, but how she *felt* to Rosalie had altered. She was older now, less prone to extreme passions; she was still sharp, critical, and dismissive of all those people she deemed stupid. Rose gold would be the right hue for Marcie now.

The woman across the aisle gave Rosalie a look: quizzical, if not entirely unfriendly. She must have been staring at the woman's body. Rosalie nodded in an amiable manner, as though to say she understood the travail of late pregnancy, and then turned her face to the window. She had no intention of causing any concern to the woman, who needed all her energy to focus on her discomfort.

My eyes won't hurt a single one of your cells, Rosalie's mother used to say when she inspected Rosalie's body, assessing every minute change. It used

BATON BLEU

Winter's revelation is always the same:
longing.
A flamingo flies overhead
a pink axe cutting through the sky.
I think of Tony Montana
alone in his hot tub
his world and everything in it
on the cusp of collapse,
watching a nature documentary
seeing the flamingos taking flight
and yelling "Pelican, fly!"
I think of Florida. I think of home.
The haters will say the bird you see
above is simply a spoonbill, but
they're just trying to bring you down, man.
I think of seeing flamingos only
on lottery billboards. A good omen.
I think of how Baton Rouge
was once a part of West Florida.
I think of how nothing escapes
the swamp's reclamation.
I think of Charles Morton
who thought birds flew
to the moon for winter.
We all have moons
we long to return to.
I watch the flamingo.
I watch until it fades
into the pink of sunset
until it becomes
what is missing.

—Ariel Francisco

to drive Rosalie into a rage, but she soon learned that the more upset she was, the more calmly and insistently her mother would examine her. What kind of mother would scrutinize a daughter's body with a collector's interest? Marianne Moore's mother, it turned out—or, at least, Rosalie could not shake off that impression after reading Moore's biography. Poor Marianne had not, it seemed, solved the problem the way Rosalie had: instead of wrapping herself in a bathrobe, Rosalie had carried every single piece of her clothing into the bathroom, where she'd buttoned and zipped and made herself as unavailable and unassailable as possible before stepping out into her mother's gaze. And her mother, with a cool, ironic smile, would say a few words that made it clear that, no matter how well a child hid her body away, a mother's eyes could always disrobe that child. "You came out of my birth canal, you suckled my breasts—how could you imagine there's anything I don't know about your body?" Had Rosalie's mother spoken those precise words? It did not matter. Not all words have to be spoken aloud to convey their message.

The train entered a tunnel. Pale fluorescent lights flickered on in the carriage. The window returned the inside of the car like a mirror, and, between her reflection and that of the woman, Rosalie chose to rest her eyes on the woman's. She was sitting in a manner that looked nearly unsustainable. The last days before a baby's arrival! Even the most seemingly restful position—sitting, lying, leaning against the back of a sofa—would not bring relief, though that ordeal would soon come to an end. And then you moved on to the next stage, with newly discovered discomforts: vaginal tears from delivery; cracked nipples and inflamed breasts from nursing; worries about diaper rash and cradle cap, about the right kind of bottle to avoid colic or the right time to start solid food so as not to burden the developing digestive system; about growth percentiles, toilet training, preschool applications. And one day all of those things would come to an end, too, whether gradually or abruptly.

The saving grace, Rosalie thought, is that not all pains and worries are permanent. Some, time-sensitive, can be desensitized by time. How else could a parent, or anyone, go on living courageously? A character in a Rebecca West novel, before going to France to be immediately killed in the Great War, says to his mother, "I am sure that if you had been told when you were a child about all the things that you were going to have to do, you would have thought you had better die at once, you would not have believed you could ever have the strength to do them." Rosalie could very well have said that to the woman across the aisle, or indeed to herself as she was twenty years ago.

A memory, long forgotten, came back to her: when she and newborn Marcie had been discharged from the hospital, Dan, carrying Marcie in a baby carrier and waiting for the elevator door to open, suddenly looked alarmed. He placed the carrier gently on the floor, knelt down next to it, and placed one ear next to the baby's face, holding his breath, listening. Two old women, both wearing blue ribbons that said "volunteer" on their blouse fronts, stopped to appreciate the sight. "That's what I call a brand-new dad," one of them remarked. "Now, this is something I wouldn't mind seeing every day," the other woman said. She selected a giant black-and-white cookie from her basket and put it in Rosalie's hand. "No, no need to pay, dear," the woman said when Rosalie indicated that she did not have any money on her. "Here, another one for you. That one is for your hubby."

The train passed villages with steepled churches, flower farms, and rivers and canals alongside which cyclists rode as though in a movie. Sometimes a passenger or two got off the train, pausing on the platform. Framed by the window, they looked as though they were extras on a film set. All those soldiers, carrying their kits on their backs and riding the trains to their untimely deaths—a hundred years later they existed no more than characters in books and films exist. Sometimes Rosalie allowed herself to imagine a passenger on the train that had cleaved her and Dan's life into before and after, but that never went far. "Imagination" might be one of the most overrated—or at least overused—words. Imagined scenarios are no more than a litmus test of the imaginer's life.

The woman across the aisle made a muffled sound behind her double masks. Her position in the seat seemed to have changed from discomfort to agony. "Are you all right?" Rosalie asked. "*Tout va bien*?"

The woman shook her head, and looked back and forth again, with greater difficulty, at the other passengers in the train car. Rosalie knew what had happened before she stepped across the aisle to the woman. Her pants, made of lightweight, oatmeal-colored fabric, revealed a darker patch. The woman's eyes, looking at Rosalie from above the mask, appeared astonishingly large.

None of the other passengers was yet aware of the emergency. Aside from the mother in the family of three—her child was no older than three or four—none of their fellow-travellers seemed qualified to deal with an imminent birth.

How do you know that? *That man sitting there might be a doctor*.

Oh, shut up, Rosalie ordered the voice.

And how do you know it's imminent? *Her water broke*, *yes*, *but it might still take an hour or two*, *or even half a day*, *before the baby is born*.

Marcie had been born on a Wednesday morning, at a quarter past eleven, but Rosalie's water had broken almost eight hours earlier. So there was still time, there was no reason to panic. She told the woman not to worry, then walked to the end of the car and pulled the emergency cord.

The passengers were roused out of their inertia, and now they were like actors moving into their assigned roles. The mother of the young child joined Rosalie, while the father carried the child to the far end of the train car despite the boy's loud protest. Rosalie opened her suitcase and fished out her rain jacket, which she spread out on the aisle floor. Another passenger—she did not see who it was—handed Rosalie a travel pillow in the shape of a plump piglet. The young mother and Rosalie helped the woman out of her seat and onto the jacket. Two young men hovered over Rosalie's shoulder, one of them making a call on his mobile phone, and she could tell he was speaking Dutch, but the seriousness in his voice grated on her nerves. What

did he know about such an emergency? The next moment, a railway employee rushed in, joined by a colleague from the other end of the car. Already it was promising to be an exciting day, which would be recounted at dinner parties or in phone calls to friends and family.

Later, in Belgium, Rosalie would document the country's picturesqueness and send the photos to Dan, but her primary motive for going to Belgium was to visit Ypres, which had seen hundreds of thousands of deaths during the First World War. Even as she was thinking of those deaths, she could hear her arguing self—or was it Marcie this time?—laughing at her illogic. *Any place in the world has seen hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of deaths, if you go back into history, no?*

Hundreds of thousands of untimely deaths, Rosalie corrected the statement in her mind.

You can't be so stupid as to think that people's deaths were timely because those people did not die on a battlefield.

No, but I know all those deaths on the battlefield were untimely.

So?

There is no *so*. Not every argument has to have a *so* in it. I simply want to go to a place where many people lie buried.

Why not Normandy?

No, I just want to go to Ypres.

Do you remember how I used to call Ypres "Wipers"?

Rosalie paused. That question, she now knew clearly, was spoken by Marcie. In middle school, Marcie had read some history books about the two World Wars, and one day confessed that she thought Ypres was pronounced "Wipers." They had both laughed, but later Rosalie read that "Wipers" was exactly what the English-speaking soldiers had called Ypres.

You know, that was what they had called Ypres—"Wipers." I read it in a story, or maybe in a novel.

By whom?

Elizabeth Jane Howard? Rebecca West? Mavis Gallant? Pat Barker? Rosalie could not say for sure. But what did it matter? The young men in those books went to war. Some returned intact or maimed, some were killed in action, and others went missing forever. They would be where Marcie was now, and yet Marcie would know none of their stories. Sometimes I wish . . . Rosalie thought, as slowly as if she were writing out each word.

I know. Don't wish.

That's right, Rosalie agreed, and yet she insisted on spelling out this one wish of hers, for Marcie, or for whatever phantom had remained in this conversation with her all these years. She wished that nature had installed a different system for people to choose their genealogy—not by their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents but by the books they read, a genealogy that could be deliberately, purposefully, and revocably created and maintained.

Don't you mean irrevocably?

No, revocably.

But that's impossible. You can't unread a book.

No, but you can edit out that book, just as in genetics a segment of DNA can be edited out.

What's the point?

The point was that Rosalie wished that she had not given Marcie "The Notebook Trilogy" to read. She wished that Marcie had taken a longer route to arrive—or, even better, had never arrived—at that bleakness. She wished there had been more time for Marcie to skim on the surface of her life. What's wrong with being superficial? With depth always comes pain.

The train had pulled into a tiny station. A one-story building, its yellow façade streaked with gray, looked as though it came right out of an old picture book. A gurney was waiting on the platform; an ambulance, its blue light silently flashing, was parked on the road that ran parallel to the tracks. Three E.M.T.s entered the train car, lifted the woman onto a stretcher, and carried her off; they were now securing her on the gurney, where she lay back in total surrender. From every train window facing the platform there were staring eyes, passengers who watched the drama with good will or indifference.

The young mother gathered Rosalie's rain jacket and returned it to her. They both raised their hands to the ambulance as it sped away, a gesture more for themselves than for the woman, who would now go on to her own battlefield, and give birth to a Wednesday's child. Was it illogical of Rosalie to think that she should have refrained from gazing at the woman's body for so long? Perhaps her mother had been wrong to claim that her scrutinizing would not harm a single cell of Rosalie's body. Perhaps Rosalie, with her surreptitious study of the woman's body, had caused some shift and changed the course of events—a Thursday's child born on Wednesday.

Don't be silly.

It's just a thought.

Forget about it.

How?

Like that baby song. How does it go? The wipers on the bus go swish swish swish, swish swish swish, swish swish swish . . .

Not all things, Rosalie thought, can be swishily wiped away. Mothers rarely murder their own children. More often they are vandals, writing out messages in ink both visible and invisible, which can never be entirely erased. Rosalie's mother, not long before her final decline, had stated her verdict on Marcie's death. "I call it karma," she said to Rosalie. What she meant was that, because Rosalie had refused to love her own mother wholeheartedly, it was a fitting punishment for Rosalie to lose a child and feel the greater pain of a more absolute abandonment. Rosalie had not replied; since Marcie's death she had been anticipating such a remark. Her mother could have surprised Rosalie, and carried her verdict to her grave, but, like many people, she could not resist the urge to inflict pain where pain could be felt, to cause wreckage when anything wreckable was within reach.

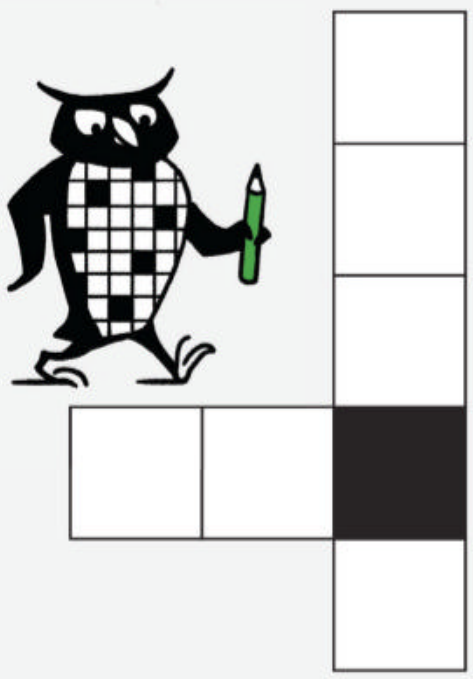
But now, on this Wednesday, the recollection of her mother's verdict did not arouse any acute feeling in Rosalie. She was on her way to Brussels, and later to Ypres. It was a sad thing that Rosalie's mother, who had loved her, had loved only with cruelty, but at least Rosalie could take solace in the fact that her love for Marcie had been kinder, and that she had never demanded that Marcie repay her, with love or with kindness. ♦

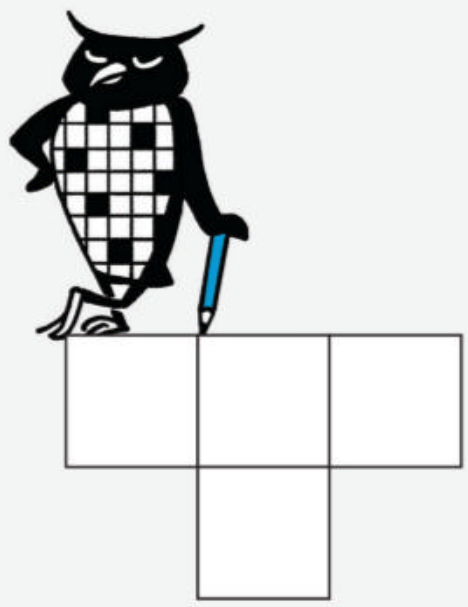
NEWYORKER.COM

Yiyun Li on how we remember the dead.

THE NEW YORKER

CROSSWORD



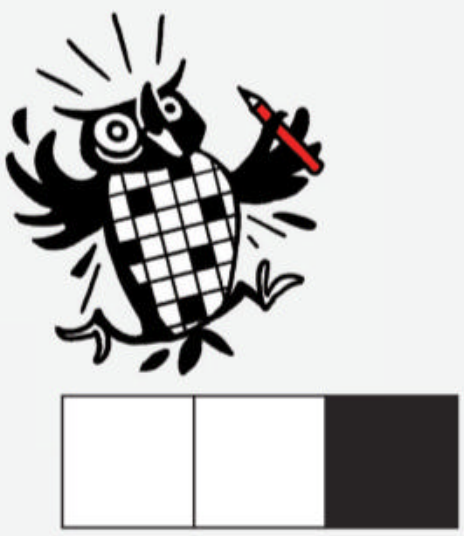


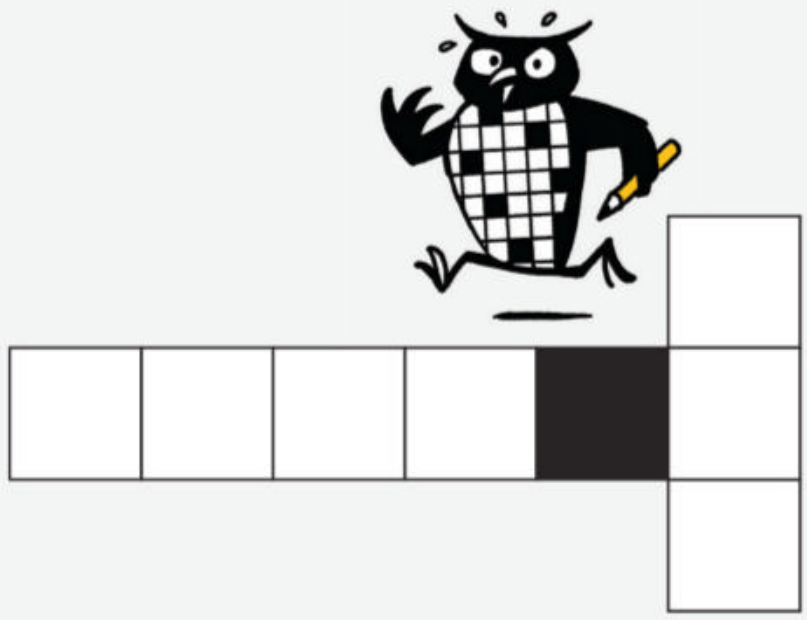
Get a clue.

Lots, actually.

The New Yorker Crossword,
now five days a week.

Play it at **newyorker.com/crossword**





Scan to play.

THE CRITICS

BOOKS

THE ROYAL ME

In "Spare," Prince Harry must be cruel only to be kind.

BY REBECCA MEAD

Balmoral Castle, in the Scottish Highlands, was Queen Elizabeth's preferred resort among her several castles and palaces, and in the opening pages of "Spare" (Random House), the much anticipated, luridly leaked, and compellingly artful autobiography of Prince Harry, the Duke of Sussex, its environs are intimately described. We get the red-coated footman attending the heavy front door; the mackintoshes hanging on hooks; the cream-and-gold wallpaper; and the statue of Queen Victoria, to which Harry and his older brother, William, always bowed when passing. Beyond lay the castle's fifty bedrooms—including the one known in the brothers' childhood as the nursery, unequally divided into two. William occupied the larger half, with a double bed and a splendid view; Harry's portion was more modest, with a bed frame too high for a child to scale, a mattress that sagged in the middle, and crisp bedding that was "pulled tight as a snare drum, so expertly smoothed that you could easily spot the century's worth of patched holes and tears."

It was in this bedroom, early in the morning of August 31, 1997, that Harry, aged twelve, was awakened by his father, Charles, then the Prince of Wales, with the terrible news that had already broken across the world: the princes' mother, Princess Diana, from whom Charles had been divorced a year earlier and estranged long before that, had died in a car crash in Paris. "He was standing at the edge of the bed, looking down," Harry writes of the moment in which he learned of the loss that would reshape his personality and determine the course of his life. He goes on to describe his father's appearance with an unusual simile: "His white dressing gown made him seem like a ghost in a play."

What ghost would that be, and what play? The big one, of course, bearing the name of that other brooding princely Aitch: Hamlet. Within the first few pages of "Spare," Shakespeare's play is alluded to more than once. There's a jocular reference: "To beard or not to beard" is how Harry foreshadows a contentious family debate over whether he should be clean-shaven on his wedding day. And there's an instance far graver: an account, in the prologue, of a fraught encounter between Harry, William, and Charles in April, 2021, a few hours after the funeral of the Duke of Edinburgh, the Queen's husband and the Royal Family's patriarch, at Windsor. The meeting had been called by Harry in the vain hope that he might get his obdurate parent and sibling, first and second in line to the throne, to see why he and his wife, Meghan, the Duchess of Sussex, had felt it necessary to flee Britain for North America, relinquishing their royal roles, if not their ducal titles. The three men met in Frogmore Gardens, on the Windsor estate, which includes the last resting place of many illustrious ancestors, and as they walked its gravel paths they talked with increasing tension about their apparently irreconcilable differences. They "were now smack in the middle of the Royal Burial Ground," Harry writes, "more up to our ankles in bodies than Prince Hamlet."

King Charles, as he became upon the death of Queen Elizabeth, in September, will not find much to like in "Spare," which may offer the most thoroughgoing scything of treacherous royals and their scheming courtiers since the Prince of Denmark's bloody swath through the halls of Elsinore. Queen Camilla, formerly "the Other Woman" in Charles and Diana's unhappy marriage, is, Harry judges, "dangerous," having "sacrificed me on her personal PR altar." William's wife, Kate, now the Princess of Wales, is haughty and cool, brushing off Meghan's homeopathic remedies. William himself is domineering and insecure, with a wealth of other deficits: "his familiar scowl, which had always been his default in dealings with me; his alarming baldness, more advanced than my own; his famous resemblance to Mummy, which was fading with time." Charles is, for the most part, more tenderly drawn. In "Spare," the King is a figure of tragic pathos, whose frequently repeated term of endearment for Harry, "darling boy," most often precedes an admission that there is nothing to be done—or, at least, nothing he can do—about the burden of their shared lot as members of the nation's most important, most privileged, most scrutinized, most publicly dysfunctional family. "Please, boys—don't make my final years a misery," he pleads, in Harry's account of the burial-ground showdown.

As painful as Charles must find the book's revealing content, he might grudgingly approve of Harry's Shakespearean flourishes in delivering

MAX MUMBY / INDIGO / GETTY; OPPOSITE: LIANA JEGERS

The Prince has suggested that he sees his book as an appeal for reconciliation, addressed to his father and brother.

it. Thirty-odd years ago, in giving the annual Shakespeare Birthday Lecture at the Swan Theatre in Stratford-Upon-Avon, the future monarch spoke of the eternal relevance of the playwright's insights into human nature, citing, among other references, Hamlet's monologue with the phrase "What a piece of work is a man!" Shakespeare, Charles told his audience, offers us "blunt reminders of the flaws in our own personalities, and of the mess which we so often make of our lives." In "Spare," Harry describes his father's devotion to Shakespeare, paraphrasing Charles's message about the Bard's works in terms that seem to refer equally to that other pillar of British identity, the monarchy: "They're our shared heritage, we should be cherishing them, safeguarding them, and instead we're letting them die."

Harry counts himself among "the Shakespeareless hordes," bored and confused as a teen-ager when his father drags him to see performances of the Royal Shakespeare Company; disinclined to read much of anything, least of all the freighted works of Britain's national author. ("Not really big on books," he confesses to Meghan Markle when, on their second date, she tells him she's having an "Eat, Pray, Love" summer, and he has no idea what she's on about.) Harry at least gives a compelling excuse for his inability to discover what his father so valued, though it's probably not one that he gave to his schoolmasters at Eton. "I tried to change," he recalls. "I opened *Hamlet*. Hmm: Lonely prince, obsessed with dead parent, watches remaining parent fall in love with dead parent's usurper . . . ? I slammed it shut. No, thank you."

That passage indicates another spectral figure haunting the text of "Spare"—that of Harry's ghostwriter, J. R. Moehringer. Harry, or his publishing house—which paid a reported twenty-million-dollar advance for the book—could not have chosen better. Moehringer is a Pulitzer Prize-winning reporter turned memoirist and novelist, as well as the ghostwriter of, most notably, Andre Agassi's thrillingly candid memoir, "Open." In that book, published in 2009, a tennis ace once reviled for his denim shorts and flowing mullet revealed himself to be a troubled, tennis-hating neurotic with father issues and an unreliable hairpiece. When the title and the cover art of "Spare" were made public, late last year, the kinship between the two books—single-word title; closeup, set-jaw portrait—indicated that they were to be understood as fraternal works in the Moehringer œuvre. Moehringer has what is usually called a novelist's eye for detail, effectively deployed in "Spare." That patched, starched bed linen at Balmoral, emblazoned with E.R., the formal initials of the Queen, is, of course, a metaphor for the constricting, and quite possibly threadbare, fabric of the institution of monarchy itself.

Moehringer has also bestowed upon Harry the legacy that his father was unable to force on him: a felicitous familiarity with the British literary canon. The language of Shakespeare rings in his sentences. Those wanton journalists who publish falsehoods or half-truths? They treat the royals as insects: "What fun, to pluck their wings," Harry writes, in an echo of "King Lear," a play about the fragility of kingly authority. During his military training as a forward air controller, a role in which he guided the flights and firepower of pilots from an earthbound station, Harry describes the release of bombs as "spirits melting into air"—a phrase drawn from "The Tempest," a play about a duke in exile across the water. Elevating flourishes like these give readers—perhaps British ones in particular—a shiver of recognition, as if the chords of "Jerusalem" were being struck on a church organ. But they also remind those readers of the necessary literary artifice at work in the enterprise of "Spare," as Moehringer shapes Harry's memories and obsessions, traumas and bugbears, into a coherent narrative: the peerless ghostwriter giving voice to the Shakespeareless prince.

Moehringer has fashioned the Duke of Sussex's life story into a tight three-act drama, consisting of his occasionally wayward youth; his decade of military service, which included two tours of duty in Afghanistan; and his relationship with Meghan. Throughout, there are numerous bombshells, which—thanks to the o'er hasty publication of the book's Spanish edition—did not so much melt into air as materialize into clickbait. These included the allegation that, in 1998, Camilla leaked word to a tabloid of her first meeting with Prince William—according to Harry, the opening sally in a campaign to secure marriage to Charles and a throne by his side. (Harry does not mention that, at the time, Camilla's personal assistant took responsibility for the leak—she'd told her husband, a media executive, who'd told a friend, who'd told someone at the *Sun*, who'd printed it. Bloody journalists.) They also include less consequential but more titillating arcana, such as Harry's account of losing his virginity, in a field behind a pub, to an unnamed older woman, who treated him "not unlike a young stallion. Quick ride, after which she'd smacked my rump and sent me off to graze." The *Daily Mail*, Harry's longtime media nemesis, had a field day with that revelation, door-stepping a now forty-four-year-old businesswoman to come up with the deathless headline "Horse-loving ex-model six years older than Harry, who once breathlessly revealed the Prince left her mouth numb with passionate kissing in a muddy field, refuses to discuss whether she is the keen horsewoman who took his virginity in a field."

The leaks have done the book's sales no harm, and neither have Harry's prepublication interviews on "Good Morning America" and "60 Minutes"; in the U.K., Harry did an hour-and-a-half-long special with Tom Bradby, the journalist to whom Meghan tearfully bemoaned, in the fall of 2019, that "not many people have asked if I'm O.K." But "Spare" is worth reading not just for its headline-generating details but also for its narrative force, its voice, and its sometimes surprising wit. Harry describes his trepidation in telling his brother that he intended to propose to Meghan: William "predicted a host of difficulties I could expect if I hooked up with an 'American actress,' a phrase he always managed to make sound like 'convicted felon'"—an observation so splendid that a reader can only hope it was actually Harry's.

There is much in the book that people conversant with the contours of the Prince's life, insofar as they have

hitherto been reported, will find familiar. At the same time, Harry bursts any number of inaccurate reports, including a rumored flirtation with another convicted fel— sorry, American actress, Cameron Diaz: "I was never within fifty meters of Ms. Diaz, further proof that if you like reading pure bollocks then royal biographies are just your thing." Not a few of the incidents Harry chooses to describe in detail are centered on images or stories already in the public domain, such as being beset by paparazzi when leaving night clubs—he explains that he started being ferried away in the trunk of his driver's car so as to avoid lashing out at his pursuers—and being required to perform uncomfortable media interviews while serving in Afghanistan in exchange for the newspapers' keeping shtum about his deployment, for security reasons. (An Australian publication blew the embargo, and Harry was swiftly extracted from the battlefield.)

Given that what Harry dredges up from his past are so often things that have been publicly documented, one wonders whether Moehringer was obliged to indulge Harry's extended dilation upon media-inflicted wounds, through Zoom sessions that even sympathetic readers will find exhausting to contemplate. There is a certain amount of score-settling and record-straightening, which, though obviously important to the author, can be wearying to a reader, who may feel that if she has to read another word about those accursed bridesmaids' dresses—of who said what to whom, and who caused whom to cry—she just might burst into tears herself. More significantly, though, there are broadsides against unforgivable intrusions committed by the press, including phone hacking. (Harry is still engaged in lawsuits against a number of British newspapers that allegedly intercepted his voice mails more than a dozen years ago.)

And then there are pages and pages devoted to Harry's personal trials, which even the most dogged reporter on Fleet Street would not dare dream of uncovering. Chief among these is Harry's struggle to overcome penile frostnip after a charitable Arctic excursion with a group of veterans, which ends up in a clandestine visit to a Harley Street doctor; he writes, "North Pole, I told him. I went to the North Pole and now my South Pole is on the fritz." "On the fritz" is an Americanism that we can hope Harry picked up while guiding American pilots—he calls them Yanks—back to base in Afghanistan, rather than the exchange being the ingenious invention of his ghostwriter. Moehringer, on the whole, does a good job of conveying the laddish argot of a millennial British prince, who addresses his friends as "mate" and—repeatedly—calls his penis his "todger."

Above all, "Spare" is worth reading for its potential historical import, which is likely to resonate, if not to the crack of doom, then well into the reign of King Charles III, and even into that of his successor. As was the case in 1992 with the publication of "Diana: Her True Story," by Andrew Morton—to whom, it was revealed after her death, the Princess of Wales gave her full coöperation, herself the ghost behind the writer—"Spare" is an unprecedented exposure of the Royal Family from the most deeply embedded of informants. The Prince in exile does not hesitate to detail the pettiness, the vanity, and the inglorious urge toward self-preservation of those who are now the monarchy's highest-ranking representatives.

It's not clear that even now, having authored a book, Harry entirely understands what a book is; when challenged by Tom Bradby about his decision to reveal private conversations after having railed so forcefully about the invasive tactics of the press, Harry replied, "The level of planting and leaking from other members of the family means that in my mind they have written countless books—certainly, millions of words have been dedicated to trying to trash my wife and myself to the point of where I had to leave my country." Pity the poor ghostwriter who has to hear his craft compared to the spewing verbiage of the media churn—by its commissioning subject, no less. (Man, what a piece of work.) Remarkably, Prince Harry has suggested that he sees the book as an invitation to reconciliation, addressed to his father and brother—a way of speaking to them publicly when all his efforts to address them privately have failed to persuade. "Spare" is, you might say, Prince Harry's "Mousetrap"—a literary device intended to catch the conscience of the King, and the King after him.

If so, the ruse seems about as likely to end well for Harry as Hamlet's play-within-a-play efforts did for him. Moehringer, at least, knows this, even if Harry may hope that his own royal plot will swerve unexpectedly from implacable tragedy to restitutive melodrama. In a soaring coda, Moehringer has the Prince once again reflecting on the royal dead, describing the family he belongs to as nothing less than a death cult. "We christened and crowned, graduated and married, passed out and passed over our beloveds' bones. Windsor Castle itself was a tomb, the walls filled with ancestors," Harry writes. It's a powerful motif: the Prince—shattered in childhood by his mother's death, his every step determined by the inescapable legacy of the countless royal dead—as an unwilling Hamlet pushed, rather than leaping, into the grave.

Recalling the meeting with his father and brother in the Frogmore burial ground with which the book began, Harry invokes the most famous soliloquy from the play of Shakespeare's that he says he once slammed shut: "Why were we here, lurking along the edge of that 'undiscover'd country, from whose bourn no traveller returns?'" Then comes a final, lovely, true, and utterly poetry-puncturing observation: "Though maybe that's a more apt description of America." In moving to the paradisaical climes of California, Harry has been spared a life he had no use for, which had no real use for him. The unlettered Prince has gained in life what Hamlet achieved only in death: his own story shaped on his own terms, thanks to the intervention of a skillful Horatio. You might almost call it Harry's crowning achievement. ♦

EVERYONE'S A CRITIC

What are literary studies for?

BY MERVE EMRE

Of the character sketches that the English satirist Samuel Butler wrote in the mid-seventeenth century—among them "A Degenerate Noble," "A Huffing Courtier," "A Small Poet," and "A Romance Writer"—the most recognizable today is "A Modern Critic." He is a contemptible creature: a tyrant, a pedant, a crackpot, and a snob; "a very ungentle Reader"; "a Corrector of the Press gratis"; "a *Committee-Man* in the Commonwealth of letters"; "a Mountebank, that is always quacking of the infirm and diseased Parts of Books." He judges, and, if authors are to be believed, he judges poorly. He praises without discernment. He invents faults when he cannot find any. Beholden to no authority, obeying nothing but the mysterious stirrings of his heart and his mind, he hands out dunce caps and placards insolently and with more than a little glee. Authors may complain to their friends, but they have no recourse. The critic's word is law.

Butler's sketch would still strike a chord with aggrieved writers today, but, in his time, the Modern Critic—part mountebank, part magician—was a new phenomenon. The figure's shape-shifting in the centuries since is the subject of John Guillory's new book, "Professing Criticism" (Chicago), an erudite and occasionally biting series of essays on "the organization of literary study." Guillory has spent much of his career explaining how works of literature are enjoyed, assessed, interpreted, and taught; he is best known for his landmark work, "Cultural Capital" (1993), which showed how literary evaluation draws authority from the institutions—principally universities—within which it is practiced. To suggest, for instance, that minor poets were superior to major ones, as T. S. Eliot did, or that the best modernist poetry was inferior to the best modernist prose, as Harold Bloom did, meant little unless these judgments could be made to stick—that is, unless there were mechanisms for transmitting these judgments to other readers. (Full disclosure: I have written an introduction to a forthcoming thirtieth-anniversary edition of the book.)

"Cultural Capital" emerged when literature departments were in the throes of the "canon wars." These were curricular skirmishes fought between progressives, who wanted to "open the canon" to work by authors from marginalized groups, and conservatives, who feared that identity politics was being elevated over aesthetic value. Guillory's insight was that these differences of opinion were, at root, almost secondary, less structural than cosmetic. Progressives and conservatives alike were participating in a system whose main function was the production of what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu called "cultural capital": the distinctive styles of speaking, writing, and reading that marked degree holders as members of the educated class. To be the kind of person who could translate the Iliad in 1880, or do a close reading of a poem in 1950, or "queer" a work in 2010, was to be manifestly the product of a university, and to reap economic and social rewards because of it. Any claim about what should be taught had to be seen in light of the academy's institutional role. Whether one spoke of the Western canon (as Bloom did), the feminist canon (as Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar did), or the African American canon (as Henry Louis Gates did), the idea of a literary canon was a form of cultural capital.

If "Cultural Capital" was a sociology of judgment, then "Professing Criticism" is a sociology of criticism, an argument about how, during the twentieth century, the practice evolved from a wide-ranging amateur pursuit, requiring no specialist training or qualifications, into a profes-

When criticism became an academic discipline, it changed in unexpected ways.

ILLUSTRATION BY BEN DENZER

sion and a discipline housed within the academy. The book's chapters take us on a strange journey, across a landscape haunted by ghosts: the bygone disciplines of philology, rhetoric, and belles-lettres; the half-glimpsed figures of the New Critics and the New York intellectuals; strident culture warriors past and present. Guillory chronicles it all with a certain Olympian detachment, a special acuity of vision that brings history into focus with painful clarity.

Professionalization, he argues, secured intellectual autonomy for criticism's practitioners. They could produce knowledge about literature in a manner intelligible chiefly to others producing the same kind of knowledge—a project that became both increasingly specialized and increasingly justified by political concerns, such as race, gender, equality, and the environment. "This is a world in which some of us can specialize in the study of cultural artifacts, and within this category to specialize in literary artifacts, and within literature to specialize in English, and within English to specialize in Romanticism, and within this period to specialize in ecocriticism of Romantic poetry," Guillory writes. The cost of this professional autonomy is influence. "How far beyond the classroom, or beyond the professional society of the teachers and scholars, does this effort reach?" he asks, knowing that the answer is: not far at all.

At the same time, the shifting economic order has made the cultural capital of literature less valuable in market terms. The professoriat has struggled to demonstrate a connection between the skills cultivated in literature classrooms and those required by the professional-managerial jobs that many students are destined for. (Writing the previous sentence, I was startled to recall, for the first time in years, the lyrics of the song "What Do You Do with a B.A. in English?," from the Broadway musical "Avenue Q": "Four years of college and plenty of knowledge / Have earned me this useless degree. / I can't pay the bills yet, / 'Cause I have no skills yet.") As a result, literary study has contracted. State legislatures have slashed funding for the arts and humanities; administrators have merged or shut down departments; and the number of tenure-track jobs for graduate students has dwindled. Since the nineteen-sixties, the proportion of students pursuing degrees in English has dropped by more than half.

The result is a tale of two crises—the economically driven "crisis of the humanities" and what Guillory calls a "crisis of legitimation" among the professoriat. These crises have a troubling and obscure relation to each other. It is not clear that even the most robust justifications for literary study would be effective in the face of overwhelming socioeconomic pressures, the rise of new media, and the decline of prose fiction as a genre of entertainment. Whatever the case may be, the hard truth is that no reader needs literary works interpreted for her, certainly not in the professionalized language of the literary scholar. Soon, Guillory writes, the knowledge and pleasure transmitted by literary criticism in the university may become "a luxury that can no longer be afforded." When that future bears down on us—and, barring a miracle or a revolution, it is a matter of when, not if—how will we justify the practice of criticism?

"Professing Criticism" proceeds on the basis that, in order to decipher the present and to prepare for the future, one must first turn to the past. "The study of literature—in the premodern sense of any writing that has been preserved or valued—is very old, the oldest kind of organized study in Western history, excepting only rhetoric," Guillory writes. But a distinct genre of writing called "criticism" first appeared in the late seventeenth century. The earliest critics were the descendants of the Renaissance humanists—editors and translators well versed in the art and literature of antiquity, from which they derived the standards they used to judge modern works. Theirs was a "Science of Criticism," Lewis Theobald, a fastidious editor of Shakespeare's plays, declared in 1733. It consisted of three duties: "Emendation of corrupt Passages," "Explanation of obscure and difficult ones," and "Inquiry into the Beauties and Defects of Composition." Emendation and explanation required the kind of intimate linguistic and historical knowledge that could be acquired only through extensive schooling. Inquiry, however, lay "open for every willing Undertaker," Theobald wrote, "and I shall be pleas'd to see it the Employment of a masterly Pen."

By the eighteenth century, there were more masterly pens at work in the burgeoning public sphere. In schools, a vernacular curriculum for the emergent middle and commercial classes had started to compete with the classical curriculum, the birthright of the aristocracy. Criticism flourished in clattery coffeehouses and debating societies, and in the raucous columns of ephemera such as pamphlets, periodicals, chapbooks, and daily newspapers. "THE NEWSPAPERS!" shouts the dramatist Sir Fretful Plagiary to the theatre critics Dangle and Sneer, in Richard Sheridan's 1779 play, "The Critic." "Sir, they are the most villainous—licentious—abominable—infernal—Not that I ever read them—No—I make it a rule never to look into a news-paper." No matter: Dangle and Sneer take it upon themselves to relay to Sir Fretful a vicious review of his recent play, to which he responds in the only way an author attempting to save face can: "Ha! ha! ha!—very good!" But, as Dangle's wife reminds her petty husband, the artist may have the last laugh. "Both managers and authors of the least merit, laugh at your pretensions," she tells him. "The PUBLIC is their CRITIC—without whose fair approbation they know no play can rest on the stage, and with whose applause they welcome such attacks as yours."

Mrs. Dangle's argument would have seemed less persuasive even a few decades later, when the critic and the public became more intimately entangled. As literacy rates rose and the cost of producing and consuming print declined, the circulation of criticism increased. The hundred years on either side of "The Critic" marked, for Virginia Woolf, the ascendancy of "the great critic—the Dryden, the Johnson, the Coleridge, the Arnold." The great critic's expertise was based on his own authority. He pronounced his judgments with passion and conviction, in a voice that drew to his side the figure that first Johnson, then Woolf, celebrated as the common reader. Creating and commanding this readership, the critic enjoyed considerable freedom in the choice of topics he addressed and the manner in which he addressed them—with "the downright vigour of a Dryden, or Keats with his fine and natural bearing, his profound insight and sanity, or Flaubert and the tremendous power

of his fanaticism," Woolf wrote. So prestigious were the Romantic and Victorian sages, Guillory observes, "that all of literature aspired to the condition of criticism (in Arnold's famous phrase, the 'criticism of life')." At the height of its cultural renown, criticism was no handmaiden to literature; it was its partner, its equal in substance and style, its superior in its capacity to enter the world beyond the page and the imagination.

Yet, at the turn of the twentieth century, something strange happened, something that, by 1925, led Woolf to look around and lament the sudden absence of greatness. "Reviewers we have but no critic; a million competent and incorruptible policemen but no judge. Men of taste and learning and ability are for ever lecturing the young," she wrote. "But the too frequent result of their able and industrious pens is a desiccation of the living tissues of literature into a network of little bones." Hovering just outside the frame of these damning sentences is the institution of the academy, the place where lectures and dissections were undertaken, and where the social order—and criticism along with it—was transformed by the rise of the profession.

Professionalization, as the sociologist Magali Sarfatti Larson defined it, was "the process by which producers of special services sought to constitute *and control* a market for their expertise." They did this by making entry into the labor market contingent on formal training and credentials. Starting in the nineteenth century, professional training began moving beyond simple apprenticeships—shadowing senior physicians or "reading the law"—and into the lecture halls of newly established schools. By the first decades of the twentieth century, national organizations had established standards for the credentialling of lawyers, doctors, and nurses. The professionalization of criticism, according to Guillory, was a less coherent affair, because criticism did not belong to a single trade or discipline. Unlike the scientific or technical fields of the university, it had no replicable method and no exemplary problem that needed to be solved. Instead, Guillory writes, it offered its practitioners "a constellation of objects"—poems, philosophical tracts, altarpieces—that call "to us across the long time of human existence."

It was in the university that the first professional readers emerged. The Renaissance humanists metamorphosed into classicists and rhetoricians (guardians of dead languages); the early modern editors into philologists and literary historians (pedantic, narrow, dry); and the Romantic and Victorian sages into belle-lettrists (idiosyncratic, overwrought, a little melancholy). Then, starting around the nineteen-thirties, there was an attempt to integrate this pantheon of characters into a single identity: the Scholar-Critic, who peers out at us from the austere faces of John Crowe Ransom and R. P. Blackmur, or, in the U.K., of F. R. and Q. D. Leavis. The Scholar-Critic attached criticism to a specifically literary object and to a method—close reading, inspired by I. A. Richards in his book "Practical Criticism." This method was reflected in a work product, the interpretive essay, and together they formed the cornerstone of most literature classes.

Establishing a formal method of critical inquiry was in part an attempt to put literary studies on a par with the sciences, which were the chief models for the development of the professions in the university. Close reading branched out into many methods of reading—rhetorical reading for the deconstructionists, symptomatic reading for the Marxists, reparative reading for the queer theorists—culminating in what has been called the "method wars." But the method

wars, Guillory argues, really represented a willingness to settle for "no method." None of these practices were replicable in a scientific sense; no literary scholar could attempt to corroborate the results of, say, a feminist critique of "Jane Eyre." Furthermore, criticism became more interested in its own protocols than in what Guillory calls "*the verbal work of art*." Discussions of how a novel or a poem worked were less valuable than whatever historical or political occurrences it manifested. The aims of criticism and of scholarship diverged.

The final phase of criticism's arc began with the rise of a figure that Roger Kimball memorably described as the "tenured radical," and which we might think of as the Scholar-Activist. For her, the proper task of criticism was to participate in social transformations occurring outside the university. The battle against exploitation, she claimed, could be waged by writing about racism, sexism, homophobia, and colonialism, using an increasingly refined language of historical context, identity, and power. Literary artifacts (poems, novels, and other playthings of the élite) could be replaced as objects of study by pop-culture ones (Taylor Swift, selfies, and other playthings of the masses). By 2004, it was possible for Edward Said to lament that there were only two paths available to the critic in an era of intense specialization. He could "either become a technocratic deconstructionist, discourse analyst, new historicist, and so on, or retreat into a nostalgic celebration of some past state of glory associated with what is sentimentally evoked as humanism." In 2023, we would consider him extremely lucky to find employment in the professoriat whichever path he chose.

In Guillory's account, this chronology serves as the backdrop against which he draws a social and psychological sketch of the scholar, a specimen who appears, from all angles, to be hideously deformed. If there is a thesis that unites the essays in "Professing Criticism," it is that professional formation entails a corresponding "déformation professionnelle." Any kind of occupational training imparts to its recipients both a sense of mastery and a certain obliviousness to what this mastery costs—namely, the loss of other ways of perceiving the world. Related terms are "occupational psychosis" (John Dewey), "trained incapacity" (Thorstein Veblen), and, most recently, "nerdview" (Geoffrey K. Pullum), all more openly pejorative than "deformation." Yet they get at the anxious and somewhat pitiable aspects of professional scholars (especially when one encounters them in herds) that Guillory, a model of courtesy and tact, sidesteps. A professional is not unlike a racehorse that has worn blinders long enough

to have grown numb to the feel of them.

All professionals are deformed; every professional is deformed in his own way. The funniest and angriest commentator on the deformation of scholars was surely Friedrich Nietzsche, whom Guillory cites. In "The Gay Science," Nietzsche writes:

> In a scholar's book there is nearly always something oppressive, oppressed: the "specialist" emerges somehow—his eagerness, his seriousness, his ire, his overestimation of the nook in which he sits and spins, his hunchback—every specialist has his hump. Every scholarly book also reflects a soul that has become crooked; every craft makes crooked. Look at the friends of your youth again, after they have taken possession of their specialty—Alas, in every case the reverse has also taken place! . . . One is the master of one's trade at the price of also being its victim.

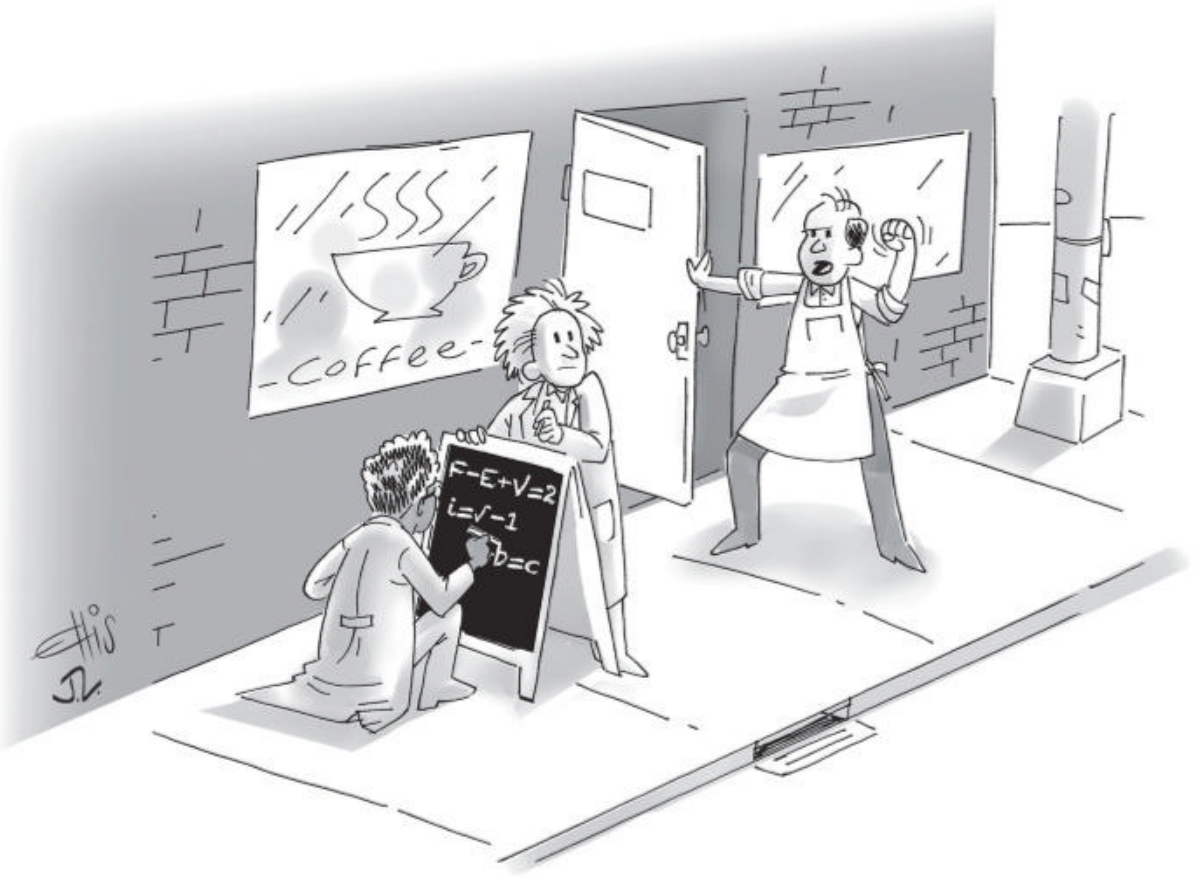
One can see the scholar—his hump and his paunch, his apathetic frame, his sharp, sagging elbows. His physical stigmata find their corollaries in his strange habits of mind and heart. This scholar was a furious being, at once thwarted by his mastery and passionately, obsessively wedded to it.

Today, in academe, one looks around with dismay at what a century of professionalization has wrought—the mastery, yes, but also the bureaucratic pettiness, the clumsily concealed resentment, the quickness to take offense, and the piety, oh, the piety! The contemporary literary scholar, Guillory tells us, is marked by an inflated sense of the urgency and importance of his work. This professional narcissism is the flip side of an insecurity about his work's social value, an anxiety that scholarly work, no matter how thoughtful, stylish, or genuinely interesting, has no discernible effect on the political problems that preoccupy him. On some level, he knows that this "form of political surrogacy," as Guillory provocatively describes it, is not enough to achieve the cultural centrality that great critics of the nineteenth century enjoyed. But that does not stop him from grasping for it. "The overweening self-regard of the scholar is the behavioral correlative of an overestimation of the aim of scholarship, which is in turn an attempt to cope with radical uncertainty about this aim," Guillory writes. "If only it were enough to say, with Aristotle, that the desire to know is all the reason of the scholar's labors!"

One suspects that Guillory is not delighted by the state of his profession, but he is careful to avoid hand-wringing or boisterous calls to action. (He would likely see such a cri de coeur as a symptom of the illness rather than as a viable prescription.) Nonetheless, "Professing Criticism" does offer those of us in the academy an opportunity to reform our deformed selves—or, more modestly, perhaps, to rethink the justifications we offer for teaching and writing about literature. Scholars, instead of chasing relevance via a politics of surrogacy, might gain from embracing the marginality of literary study. Doing so could free criticism's practitioners to play to their hidden strengths: their ability to pronounce with intensity and determination on the beauties and defects of writing; their capacity to think about language with absorption and intelligence; their mingled love of art, craft, erudition, connection, and sensuousness. Who knows what consequences this might have on the attractiveness of the discipline to undecided undergraduates or interested lay readers?

Admittedly, this all risks sounding sentimental, as Said warned. But, in a soaring coda to "Professing Criticism," Guillory lays out five unsentimental rationales for literary study in the present and the future based on the long history of the functions that it has fulfilled. The first rationale, "linguistic/cognitive," sees criticism as a forum for highly cultivated practices of listening, speaking, reading, and writing that serve as the deepest foundations for the development of thought. The second, "moral/judicial," raises questions of ethical instruction as they relate to representation and interpretation; for instance, can a distasteful thought expressed by the narrator of a novel also be attributed to its author? This rationale is most prominent in lay reading, and although academics often deplore the tendency of lay reading to degrade into the labelling of characters as good or bad, likable or unlikable, it is also the covert justification for political critique, Guillory writes, "where works of literature are judged as moral agents themselves, collusive or resistant as the case may be."

The third rationale, "national/cultural," stems from the way that, starting in the early modern era, the emerging concept of national identity was intertwined with a new appreciation for vernacular literature, which had previously carried less prestige than Latin and ancient Greek. The fourth rationale, "aesthetic/critical," is the one that Guillory places at the point of schism between the world of reviewing and the literary



"Hey! That blackboard is for coffee puns only!"

professoriat, which could never figure out how to teach or credential aesthetic judgment. It is here that Guillory makes his boldest, most openly prescriptive claim. "Our discipline is, or should be, committed to developing the capacity to judge among readers of literature. It has been too easy for the discipline to relegate judgment to the unspoken, or even to disparage it as just a ruse of ideology," he writes. "More than ever, the uncertainty of aesthetic pleasure in literature calls for a sophisticated theory of cultural transmission in all of its sites, but above all in the classroom, where all the ladders of the discipline find their start." By the time we get to the fifth and final rationale, "epistemic/disciplinary," one wants badly to climb back down the ladder.

Of all the pressures on professional formation faced by literary scholars today, perhaps the most intense is the fear of exclusion from the profession altogether. Guillory's book is sure to rouse strong feelings in a generation or two of scholars who continue to suffer underemployment and precarity. Such experiences yield deformations of their own: regret at wasted time; pain of a future foreclosed; bitterness that others have access to resources for reasons that seem arbitrary or unfair. "To be a freelance scholar, no matter the quality of one's scholarship, is precisely to be excluded from the system of rewards," Guillory argues. A profession, he observed in "Cultural Capital," is an ego-ideal, an inner image of oneself. There is perhaps nothing harder or less rewarding to historicize than a bruised ego.

In "Professing Criticism," Guillory concludes an essay titled "On the Permanent Crisis of Graduate Education" by pointing to the rise of venues that accommodate the kinds of criticism that the university cannot. "These are sites (for the most part) of intellectual exchange on the internet, new versions of 'little magazines,' such as *n+1*, or of journals such as *The Point*, as well as the now vast proliferation of blogs on cultural matters, some of which host high-level exchanges," he writes. "Such sites disclose the widespread desire for an engagement with literature and culture that is more serious than the habits of mass consumption and that demands new genres and forms of discourse." He does not develop the point further. Yet one suspects, given what such magazines and blogs can afford to pay, that any prospective contributor will have to hold a job, or several. Here one catches a sudden glimpse of a future in which the Scholar-Critic kaleidoscopes into many hyphenated identities: the Critic-Copy Editor, the Critic-Community Organizer, the Critic-Assistant, the Critic-Amazon Warehouse Associate-Uber Driver. (I leave to one side the Critic of Independent Means and the Critic Who Married Into Money.)

This new kind of critic may write for one of the magazines that Guillory names. But there's no reason to restrict ourselves to such venues. It is not unusual to stumble upon an essay on Goodreads or Substack that is just as perceptive as academic or journalistic essays, which, no matter how many rounds of revision they undergo, reflect the *déformation professionnelle* of their respective spheres. Nor should we limit the domain of criticism to writing. Anyone who has taught students knows that the best critiques are often produced in the classroom, through conversations in which one is trying to demonstrate how a poem or a novel works to many different readers, few of whom aspire to write or to join the professoriat.

Early in "Professing Criticism," Guillory writes that I. A. Richards regarded criticism "as a practice in which every reader of literature was engaged." But a different proposition presents itself: If everybody is a critic, then no one is. The idea recalls Guillory's ending to "Cultural Capital," in which he walks his reader through a thought experiment that Karl Marx undertook in "The German Ideology." Under the communist organization of society, Marx speculates, eliminating the division of labor will also eliminate the distinction that accrues to artists—writers, painters, sculptors, composers, actors, critics, and other producers of "unique labors." The utopian horizon of aesthetic production is the disappearance of the painter, the writer, the actor, the composer, and the critic—or, rather, the disappearance of painting, writing, and so on as autonomous domains. In this world, there would be no professional critics, only people who engage in criticism as one activity among many.

"Cultural producers would still compete to have their products read, studied, looked at, heard, lived in, sung, worn, and would still accumulate cultural capital in the form of 'prestige' or fame," Guillory writes. But it would not matter whether you published criticism in the form of a Goodreads review or a magazine article; whether criticism was transmitted through the written word or the spoken one, in the form of podcasts or public lectures; whether the object of criticism was a novel, a film, a show, a song, a dance, a painting, a dress. All that would matter would be the logic of the critic's thought, the pleasure of her style, the persuasiveness of her judgments, and the education imparted through her words. The result would be to liberate criticism from the institutions of the materially advantaged, allowing it to overflow into the activities of daily life.

The profession of literary study as it is currently institutionalized in the university may not be the place from which the journey toward a future criticism begins. Literary criticism may have to be de-professionalized before its practitioners will allow themselves to openly embrace aesthetic judgment or to speak in the voice of the lay reader once more. There are various sites that present themselves as alternatives not only for writing but also for teaching: adult and continuing-education programs, community centers, bookstores, book festivals, teach-ins, even the social-media platforms of the Internet.

Ultimately, however, it may not be in the U.S. or the U.K., or even in the English language, that the future dramas of criticism will unfold. It is easy to believe, with the blind confidence of provincial and protected people, that the profession begins and ends on either side of the Atlantic, with your Yale College or your Harvard, your Oxford or your Cambridge. But there is a wide world that stretches beyond the institutions of the Anglosphere, and there are governments that, for one reason or another, remain more interested in helping the arts and humanities to flourish as part of the larger human endeavor. To sit alongside Guillory on his high perch, or maybe a branch or two higher, is not to dream of the past or to mourn the present. It is to scan new horizons for the second coming of the critic. ♦

THE BOOK OF LOVE

Reimagining the Victorian reformers who defended same-sex desire.

BY NIKHIL KRISHNAN

To live in the world as they dreamed it could be, sexual dissidents risked everything.

ILLUSTRATION BY FABIEN CORRE

E. M. Forster's friends tried more than once to persuade him to publish "Maurice." The novel, which he wrote when he was thirty-five, moldered in a drawer for decades afterward, with a note attached that read, "Publishable. But worth it?" In other words, was it worth the risk to career, friendships, and family for someone with his literary reputation and social standing to publish a novel whose main character was an "unspeakable of the Oscar Wilde sort"? "I am ashamed at shirking publication," he told Christopher Isherwood, "but the objections are formidable." One friend put it to him that the French writer André Gide's memoirs made no secret of his homosexuality. "Gide hasn't got a mother," Forster replied ruefully.

He meant, of course, a *living* mother, to be shocked and anguished by the revelation. But the death of Forster's mother made no difference. Formidable new objections arose, concerning the risks to the reputation of Bob Buckingham, the manly policeman who was Forster's almost-lover for many years. As the Freudians have long told us, the real censor isn't so much the flesh-and-blood mother as the one inside. Meanwhile, cowardice is good at masquerading as prudence or social responsibility or simple kindness. Whatever will the neighbors think? What about the children? And what will it do to poor Mama?

One of the ways in which the internal censor makes itself felt is through the familiar prickings of shame, an experience that has linked gay people across generations. And when moral modernizers, in the late nineteenth century, began to argue that homosexuality was no reason for shame—and when, conversely, the perils of their stance were made clear by the public reaction to the trial of Oscar Wilde—gay writers had to confront another, more complex feeling: shame at feeling ashamed, at being afraid, at being a liar.

Tom Crewe's début novel, "The New Life" (Scribner), is a genealogy of both kinds of shame, tracing a line back to the first generation of men to seek a way out of these burdens. A Victorian historian by training, Crewe makes it clear that his two principal characters are modelled on real figures. One of them, John Addington, is drawn from the life of John Addington Symonds, an independently wealthy scholar, poet, and critic. Symonds published the first complete translation of Michelangelo's sonnets, which was based on the original manuscripts and did not evade the fact that many were love poems addressed to a man. He was also among the first to insist that Plato's celebrations of male-male love were entirely in earnest, and reflected a historical reality of (aristocratic) life in ancient Athens. By the time Crewe's story begins, in 1894, his Addington is about to take a grave risk, by publishing a book that he knows is bound to occasion scandal.

That book, "Sexual Inversion," was real; Symonds wrote it with the pioneering sexologist Havelock Ellis, helping him collect the set of anonymized case studies it presented. In Crewe's novel, a Havelock Ellis-like character appears as Henry Ellis, and ends up playing sense to Addington's sensibility. Both men are married, not quite happily. Ellis's wife, Edith, like her historical counterpart, is a "female invert" who maintains an independent household with another woman; Addington's wife, Catherine, is resigned to the fact

that her husband insists on bringing his lovers home, only because she has no power to stop him.

"The New Life" immediately announces the liberties that a novelist enjoys and a historian does not: it opens with a wet dream, in which Addington finds himself wedged intimately against the body of another man in a packed train carriage. When Addington awakens, spent and vaguely ashamed, he apologizes to his wife for the "spill," a "soft, married word, evoking nothing of its violence, the stuff that was wrenched from him." "Wrenched from him": Addington experiences his sexuality, in these moments, as something entirely external, a compulsion, a necessity.

Why else would he dare to let his eyes linger on the bodies of strangers, collecting material for future fantasy from the paltry images that Victorian male dress codes allow him: "the twist of hair on a nape; the way loose collars sometimes showed a glimpse of naked shoulders; the way trousers encircled a waist, brought out its beauty, like a bracelet on a woman's wrist"? Why else would he risk exposure as a voyeur in arcadia? Watching in open-mouthed wonder the bathers in London's Serpentine Lake, he sees an almost classical scene: "The dance of light, the sound of water; men in the company of men, nakedness carelessly worn; everything natural, pure." The men he ogles are, of course, nearly all working class, "their physiques molded and stamped by labor." Addington idealizes even as he objectifies, seeing in them the possibility of "another kind of life."

"Another kind of life" hints also at Crewe's title. The New Life is, among other things, the name of a reformist society to which Henry Ellis and his wife belong. Its historical counterpart, the Fellowship of the New Life, sought to transform society by transforming individual character. In Crewe's novel, the Society of the New Life is what brings the two together in the first place. For Ellis, who is almost certainly what came to be called "heterosexual," the topic of nonstandard sexuality is related to the problem of Edith and her possessive female lover; the book he is writing with Addington is a way of trying to understand his wife. There is also what Crewe terms Ellis's "peculiarity, tickling, warm" (and shared by his historical counterpart): prone to impotence, he is aroused by the spectacle or even the thought of a woman urinating.

Addington lives out, in his own small, somewhat squalid way, his vision of the future. He picks up, or, rather, is picked up by, a man of a lower social class, a Mr. Feaver, who works in a printing shop as a compositor. Open about his sexual desires, Feaver is too comfortable in his own skin to occupy a permanently inferior position in their relationship. Feaver is installed in Addington's house and is allowed to befriend his daughters; Catherine Addington is left simply to put up with the situation. She must, in her husband's self-lacerating assessment, be sacrificed "on the altar of his integrity." If he is to address the world, Addington believes, "he must further shed the disguise it had bid him wear in the years of his quietude."

The "new life" is not just a vision of liberation. Addington has already known sexual freedom of a sort, in childhood, when the hairy older boys at his boarding school made "tawdry playthings" of younger ones. What Addington wants is a sexuality that belongs within a larger picture of the good and the beautiful, something he gets only from his classical studies: "He read the Symposium; he fell in love with the possibility of love between men, chaste, clean and elevating." Like Forster's Maurice a few decades later, he disobeyed his tutors' injunction to disregard the text's celebratory portrayal of "the unspeakable vice of the Greeks." The historical Symonds was the author of the pioneering, though privately printed, pamphlet "A Problem in Greek Ethics," which made the case for not ignoring the homoerotic parts of Plato's Symposium. Its companion essay, "A Problem in Modern Ethics," was—as Shane Butler observes, in "The Passions of John Addington Symonds" (Oxford), a monumental new monograph—"the first to import a recent German coinage into English print, as 'homosexual.'"

Still, Addington, like his historical model, cannot subsist entirely on Platonic abstractions. Earlier in his life,

"Excuse me. My friend and I have a bet going—is this a bistro, a brasserie, or a gastropub?"

he found himself paying a soldier to undress for him. Crewe's laconic monosyllables evoke the full pathos of the situation: "That was all. He sat in a chair and watched him undress; made him stand there, turn about. He lived on it for a year."

Symonds, with his privilege and filigreed verse, was a very odd type of social prophet, and so is his fictional counterpart. Living half openly with a male lover is one thing. It is quite another to enlist Ellis in producing a book of case studies on "inversion." Yet Addington's hopes are high. Such a book might achieve in England what the writings of the German jurist Karl Heinrich Ulrichs—notably the twelve-part study "The Riddle of Man-Manly Love"—did in Germany: set forth a non-pathological language for talking about what Plato had once described, and show, in Addington's words, that homosexuals "are neither physically, intellectually, nor morally inferior to normally constituted individuals."

Ulrichs's scientific sexology provides one model for what needs to be achieved; Walt Whitman's poetic effusions provide another, offering a vision of homosexuality as what Ellis terms "the normal activity of a healthy nature," without the old shame at its heart. If the book succeeds, Addington reflects, it might convince at least a few people that the sex instinct can assume "countless forms, all within the range of human possibility, all conducive to happiness."

Addington is enraged and distressed that the first man to draw widespread attention to his cause is, as he sees it, an unworthy standard-bearer. Like others at the time, he recognizes Oscar Wilde's stupidity in suing his lover's father for defamation when Wilde had made it so easy to establish the truth of the supposedly defamatory epithet ("somdomite"). But Addington's anger goes further: Wilde, in his wantonness, had no standing to "invoke the Greeks in his defense. To drag idealism into it. Shakespeare and Michelangelo. A pure and perfect affection, indeed. The love that dare not speak its name, indeed. He has brought each and every one of us down with him."

In fact, one of the historical Symonds's most important achievements was distinguishing that morally neutral predilection "homosexuality" from the tendency with which it was often conflated: "pederasty." Wilde notoriously blurred the lines in his own conduct, a fact that any attempt to make a gay saint of him must face up to. Crewe's Addington recoils at seeing Plato invoked "to justify the man who pays a boy drunk on champagne to share his bed, who deals with blackmailers as others do with their grocer." In his more honest moods, Addington decides that his sharp distinction between the good invert and the bad, like that better-known Victorian distinction between the deserving and undeserving poor, will not stand the test of reality. There is no such thing as a blameless life: "It is all furtiveness, lies, greed, vice, hurting other people out of fear."

Certainly, there are excuses, some of them good ones: "It is all an effect of the law." But the fact that one hurts other people out of fear of the law, Crewe makes plain, hardly changes the fact that one does hurt them. When Catherine reads the account in Addington and Ellis's book that is clearly by and about her husband, she is understandably unforgiving: "I was not free to go into the streets, to go with soldiers to their dirty lodgings. I was not free to bring strange men to this house. I was not free to install in it a man of another class, twenty years younger. . . . But it is you who have been lonely. It says so in your book."

Addington's mode of self-reproach has a different sting. Every so often, he has a crisis of faith: "Irrumatio, fellatio, paedicatio. For these he had eschewed study, art, friendship; he had sacrificed all the comforts of a home, the dignity of a marriage." The Latin euphemisms are one sign of the shame, as is the idea that sex must contrast with, not complement, both comfort and dignity. Crewe is drawing on Symonds's own yearning for purity. Symonds once declared his personal motto to be *In mundo immundo sim mundus:* "In an impure world, may I be pure." In a memoir intended to be published many years after his death, he wrote of how it was through reading Plato's Phaedrus and Symposium that he "discovered the true *Liber Amoris* at last, the revelation I had been waiting for, the consecration of a long-cherished idealism." Plato made him see "the possibility of resolving in a practical harmony the discords of my inborn instincts." It "filled my head with an impossible dream, which controlled my thoughts for many years."

Crewe has written another *Liber Amoris*, another "book of love," that spells out more precisely than Symonds ever managed to do how Platonic idealism, as Shane Butler says in his monograph, "gives even as it takes away." Helpfully, this idealism allowed Symonds "to distinguish his desires from the crass and often violent homosocial rites of passage of the British ruling class." Yet, Butler adds, "it was mapped across a dualism" that he could not transcend. Symonds's desperate desire for cleanness coexisted, after all, with the fantasy he recorded in his anonymous case study for the book he wrote with Ellis: to service a group of sailors and to be their "dirty pig." His Platonic ideal of love, in any case, contains a large non sequitur. Why must love be chaste to be clean, clean to be elevating? Why must it be elevating at all?

In "The New Life," Addington's academic friend Mark Ludding presents him—as the Cambridge philosopher Henry Sidgwick presented Symonds—with the utilitarian case against public candor. Addington can try all he likes to portray himself as nothing but "a disinterested sympathizer, determined on reforming the law," but, after the Wilde trial, who will believe him? How, in any event, would such candor make him, his family, the world happier?

Ludding, looking at the situation impartially, from "the point of view of the universe" (to quote Sidgwick's most notorious coinage), has arrived at a simple injunction: never to act on his own feelings. Thinking about his wife, Ludding can say to Addington, "I have not

given her all of myself. But I have given all that I could. I can say that before the universe." That remaining part of himself he has given to no one. Addington isn't persuaded by the argument. He's convinced that the universe, or at least their corner of it, can and will change: "I listened to him too long, balancing the one thing against all the others. Now I understand that life is absolute. It is the only interest." He adopts as a utopian credo, in defiance of Ludding's stern counsels, a line he has borrowed from Ellis: "We must live in the future we hope to make."

In "The New Life," Crewe distinguishes himself both as novelist and as historian. He has clearly done what G. M. Young, the great scholar of Victorian England, once recommended: to read until one can hear the people speak. Crewe's Victorians do indeed sound like human beings, not period-piece puppets. He has, more unusually, found a prose that can accommodate everything from the lofty to the romantic and the shamelessly sexy.

His way into the history avoids the riskier project exemplified by such novels as Damon Galgut's "Arctic Summer" (2014) and Colm Tóibín's "The Magician" (2021), which fictionalize the desires and repressions of, respectively, E. M. Forster and Thomas Mann. The use of the men's real names makes the authors straightforwardly accountable to the known facts of the historical record in a way that Crewe is not. At the same time, Crewe's project is distinct from that of, say, Alan Hollinghurst in "The Stranger's Child" (2011), which traces the life and shifting posthumous reputation of a minor First World War-era poet who is evidently inspired by the handsome, bisexual Rupert Brooke but is ultimately very much an invention.

The relationship of Crewe's novel to history is somewhere between these two models. The real John Addington Symonds died in 1893—of tuberculosis, at age fifty-two—a year after he started work on "Sexual Inversion" with Havelock Ellis, and two years before the prosecution of Oscar Wilde. Crewe conjures a world in which the Symonds character, buffeted by the attendant furor, is forced to confront the consequences of the work's publication, in an obscenity trial. The element of "alternate history" is all the more potent for its subtlety. Crewe is not trying, wishfully, to give his characters the happy endings they were denied in life. In many ways, his fictional Addington and Ellis have an even harder time of it than their historical counterparts. Imagining them going through the anxieties of a trial becomes a way to probe not only the emancipatory project of Crewe's eminent Victorians but also the mental toll of their stigmatized sexualities.

The psychological effects of that stigma have proved remarkably durable. In Garth Greenwell's pointedly titled "Cleanness" (2020), a character reflects, of a lover, "Sex had . . . always been fraught with shame and anxiety and fear, all of which vanished at the sight of his smile, simply vanished, it poured a kind of cleanness over everything we did." There it is again, the need for sex and sexual desire to be cleaned up. But here a smile will suffice to dissipate shame and situate gay sex as part of Whitman's "normal activity of a healthy nature."

The Victorian reformers had to decide how far the boundaries of the normal should extend. The real Symonds, although he adopted tones of moral indignation about élite pederasty, was capable of entertaining elaborate, steamy fantasies about a boy just out of school. His case study in "Sexual Inversion" describes an affair, a little too decorously, as a "close alliance with a youth." He certainly wasn't beyond cavorting with youthful porters in Davos or gondoliers in Venice, one of whom became a long-term lover-servant. Not that he was fully at ease with these aspects of his character. He wrote to Robert Louis Stevenson that his recent book "touches one too closely. Most of us at some epoch of our lives have been on the verge of developing a Mr Hyde." Addington is, then, a somewhat cleaned-up figure. His desires, directed at the fully adult, relatively autonomous Feaver, will pass twenty-first-century muster, as many of Symonds's passions—and, more obviously, Wilde's—do not.

Addington, although more Jekyll than Hyde, illustrates a different ethical problem and a more interesting one. "Life is absolute. It is the only interest." What to make of Addington's declaration? It can sound as if he were pointing to a life outside moral judgment, governed by nothing other than desire. Perhaps that was what Wilde, in his more destructive moods, sought. But Addington has something else in mind. By the end of Crewe's story, his situation recalls a wonderful remark of Simone Weil's: "Man would like to be an egoist and cannot. This is the most striking characteristic of his wretchedness and the source of his greatness." Addington wants to satisfy the demands not of an ever-hungry superego but simply of common decency: to do his duty as husband and father, but at a time when the demands of duty can be met only at the cost of his integrity.

Crewe deftly sets the stage for a climactic, existentialist choice. Addington says at one point, in an attack of bad conscience, that the invert "must betray the trust and mock the love of the woman who has pledged herself to him . . . must risk ruining and shaming his dependents. He must lie in order to live." But existentialism has taught us to regard that "must" with suspicion. *Must* he?

Authenticity, Jean-Paul Sartre wrote, "consists in having a true and lucid consciousness of the situation, in assuming the responsibilities and risks that it involves, in accepting it in pride or humiliation, sometimes in horror and hate." It "demands courage and more than courage," Sartre went on. "It is no surprise that one finds it so rarely." Where does that leave Crewe's tortured characters? Outside of occasional moments of self-pity, Addington, by Sartre's reckoning, has already passed the test. Whatever he goes on to choose, he will do so in full and excruciating awareness of the essential tragedy of the situation. His actions will hurt and wrong people he loves.

The existentialist motto was "existence precedes essence"—roughly, what you do is what determines who you are. The Victorian invert would have been, as the Danish sociologist Henning Bech put it, "born existentialist": Sidgwick and Symonds were alike in their decision to be tragic heroes or tragic villains or simply tragic

victims. But they had decided that they would, in any case, be tragic, in the classical sense: they would confront, head on, a conflict between ethical imperatives. The proper response to their decision is not blame for the choice they made but pity that they had to make one at all.

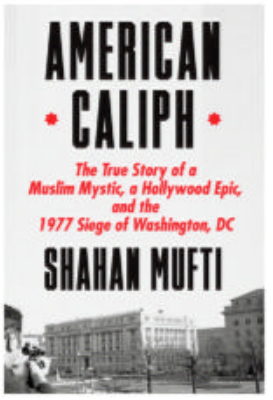
Crewe writes in a world where the basic elements of the vision of Symonds and Ellis have been realized. Styles of candor that were once heroic are now commonplace. Gay men confronting this history can sometimes feel a little hard done by, as if they had been deprived of a chance to be heroic, or even naughty. It gets harder every year to upset poor Mama.

But fiction allows the reader to dwell for a time in a place where the stakes are higher and the future open. Crewe's principals, like their historical counterparts, experience their sexuality as a Greek tragic hero might experience his fatal flaw: as a part of their character and, thus, as something that dictates their destinies. Yet they are able to see that it is a contingent fact about their own era that it counts certain features of their makeup as flaws: a contingent fact and, therefore, a mutable one. It gives them comfort to imagine what might change, in part through their exertions, in the proverbial fullness of time.

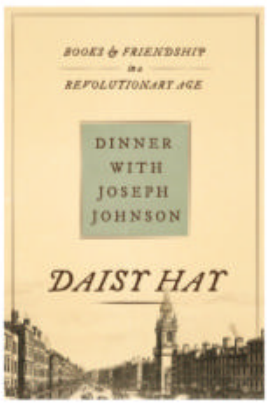
Addington and Ellis, and their wives and lovers, cannot live in the fullness of time; they have to live, and possibly die, in the eighteen-nineties. Their acute awareness of being born too early for happiness is what gives Crewe's characters their poignancy. In their hopeless dreams of integrity, they embody the perennial tragedy of the utopian. E. M. Forster, deciding that "Maurice" would appear only posthumously, dedicated the novel "To a Happier Year," a phrase that evokes the melancholy words at the end of "A Passage to India": "No, not yet."

But it is not all hopeless. "You have proved to me already," one of Crewe's characters says, "that marriage can be organized differently, that it can mean new things." This "already"—Crewe's riposte to "not yet"—is an intimation that some visions of utopia needn't wait on posterity for their vindication. It is the most comforting word in the book. ♦

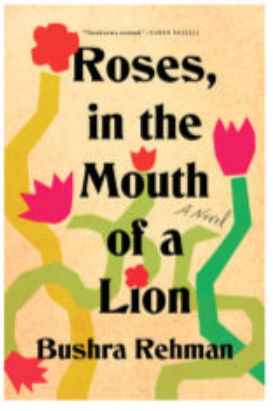
BRIEFLY NOTED



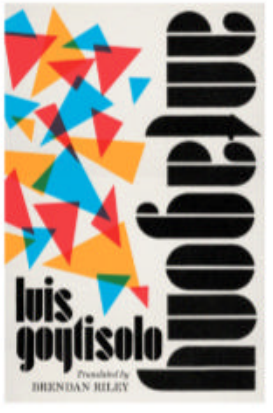
American Caliph, *by Shahan Mufti (Farrar, Straus & Giroux)*. In March, 1977, a Black Muslim organization, the Hanafis, seized three buildings in Washington, D.C., taking more than a hundred hostages. Their leader, Hamaas Abdul Khaalis, had two demands: that he be allowed to "carry out Allah's justice" on Nation of Islam members who killed his family, and that a bio-pic of the Prophet Muhammad be banned. This history adeptly weaves together narratives of the hostage negotiations, of feuding American Islamic groups, and of Khaalis's life, which was shaped by race, theology, and the faulty "machinery of American justice." Mufti observes, "Khaalis may have been acting under the Islamic title 'khalifa,' but he, and his actions, were, above all, American."



Dinner with Joseph Johnson, *by Daisy Hay (Princeton)*. From the seventeen-seventies until 1809, Johnson, a London publisher and bookseller, held a weekly dinner above his shop. Guests, many of whom he published, included such luminaries as Mary Wollstonecraft, Thomas Paine, William Cowper, and Joseph Priestley. As this history shows, Johnson supported his writers in myriad invaluable ways: he gave houseroom to Wollstonecraft when she had nowhere else to go, and he may have secured Paine's release when he was jailed following the publication of "Rights of Man." But Johnson's greatest service to literature may have been the community he forged—"connected by a web that spun outwards from Johnson's house through the medium of paper."



Roses, in the Mouth of a Lion, *by Bushra Rehman (Flatiron)*. Set in Corona, Queens, in the nineteen-eighties, this novel is an ode to adolescence in the vein of "A Tree Grows in Brooklyn"—a book that young Razia, a first-generation Pakistani American, reads early in the story. As Razia strains against the restrictions imposed by her Muslim family, Rehman ably evokes the period—the AIDS epidemic, the deficiencies of the 7 train—and the texture of life in a jumble of immigrant communities. Once Razia's peers start being married off, she comes to question her faith: "We were groomed like Christmas trees, thinking we were in the beautiful woods, thinking we were growing, but we were just being readied to be cut down."



Antagony, *by Luis Goytisolo, translated from the Spanish by Brendan Riley (Dalkey Archive)*. This quartet of novels, three of them previously untranslated, are a classic of Spanish postwar literature often compared to the works of Proust and Joyce. The first three parts form a Künstelerroman whose protagonist, Raúl, emerges as the ostensible author of the fourth part. As he urges himself to go "from literal transposition to the displacement and transmutation of narrative material," we see him fictionalize events from the preceding volumes. In pages-long sentences, Goytisolo's characters expound on the book's true subjects: Barcelona and the tumult of the Franco years. The city's streets, Goytisolo writes, "had not found and perhaps would never find a faithful chronicler for their grandeur and their misery."

ON TELEVISION

TWO FOR THE ROAD

"The Last of Us," on HBO.

BY INKOO KANG

In the post-apocalyptic diseasescape of the new dramatic thriller "The Last of Us," on HBO, survivors are offered the choice between a regimented existence in scattered quarantine zones under a repressive police state and near-certain death beyond their borders. Inside the government's densely patrolled walls, it's believed that only the nihilistic sort—slavers, marauders, terrorists—would risk infection by the creatures that wiped out civilization two decades ago: mutated parasitic fungi called cordyceps, which hijack their human hosts and turn them into zombies. The infected, who slowly hybridize with the parasites to become more impervious, may well be ineradicable as a species. When the mutation is first discovered, in Jakarta, a petrified mycologist advises, "Bomb this city and everyone in it."

Cities *were* shelled in an effort to stamp out the cordyceps, and small towns were replaced by mass graves. A fascination with panicked brutality links "The Last of Us," co-created by Craig Mazin, to his previous series, "Chernobyl." On the autumn night in 2003 that the cordyceps arrive in Austin, a construction worker named Joel (Pedro Pascal) attempts to flee in a truck with his teen-age daughter, Sarah (Nico Parker), and his younger brother, Tommy (Gabriel Luna). He denies help to a young family stranded on the side of a road and is soon repaid exponentially for his hard-heartedness when a soldier is instructed via walkie-talkie, with no explanation, to execute Sarah. In the present day, Joel, now a skilled smuggler, plans to break out of a Massachusetts quarantine zone with his partner, Tess (a soulful Anna Torv), and head to Wyoming in search of Tommy. The pair are reluctantly convinced by the new order's resistance movement—whose leader Joel scornfully calls "the Che Guevara of Boston"—to transport a fourteen-year-old girl, Ellie (Bella Ramsay), to a scientific base out West. Immune to the cordyceps, she may hold the key to a vaccine. (If such a breakthrough comes to pass, one can imagine a second season of the show that contends with the characters' bafflement at the widespread mistrust of a lifesaving jab.)

Genre-savvy and satisfyingly tense, "The Last of Us" is adapted with affectionate but not deferential fidelity from the 2013 video game of the same name. Neil Druckmann, who wrote and co-directed the award-winning third-person shooter, created the TV series with Mazin. I have never played The Last of Us, and, for viewers justifiably leery of video-game adaptations, one of the highest compliments I can pay the show is that I wouldn't have guessed that Joel and Ellie's mordant, spiritedly macabre adventures first began in pixelated form. (Provocatively, a late sequence structured like a conventional shooter game makes us reconsider the morality of the gunman.) Audiences unfamiliar with the source material are more likely to be reminded of other popular series. "Game of Thrones" is an obvious influence, not just in the casting of the two leads, who played fan favorites on the medieval-fantasy juggernaut, but in its character-driven stakes and seductive evocations of brute force as a sometimes necessary evil. "Station Eleven," the defiantly optimistic portrait of a Shakespearean theatre troupe wayfaring through a post-pandemic Midwest, is another precursor, in images if not in tone; the Ozymandian sights of nature's reclamations in "The Last of Us"—ducks and frogs swimming blithely in a flooded hotel

Joel's patriarchal protectiveness of Ellie sometimes verges on something darker.

ILLUSTRATION BY KATHERINE LAM

lobby, or a herd of roaming giraffes seemingly escaped from a zoo—conjure that same beauty of perseverance amid desolation.

Mazin and Druckmann eventually carve out their own niche between the relative sunniness of "Station Eleven" and the self-conscious grimness and shock-for-shock's-sake violence of, say, "The Walking Dead." The show's rough-hewn center is the surrogate father-daughter bond between Joel and Ellie, but the series works best as an anthropological travelogue of post-catastrophe subcultures, teasing out the disparate ways that survivors rebuild mini-societies and create new alignments of power.

Between the monomaniacal militias and the self-cannibalizing cults, a deserted preschool classroom, constructed underground, stands as a brightly muraled testament to the blind hope that many parents still nursed for their children, while a heavily guarded commune risks the messy ideals of equality and coöperation even in the face of existential peril. These long detours are often accompanied by rather moving vignettes centered on minor characters. An early highlight is Bill (Nick Offerman), a smugly paranoid, hypercompetent prepper who relishes the mostly unpestered solitude of near-extinction, until the arrival of a hungry trespasser (Murray Bartlett) forces him to grapple with the loneliness he's tried to deny. Scott Shepherd is as terrifying as any of the spore-heads in his role as a soft-voiced pastor who preys on his followers' need for solace and guidance. A peevish husband and wife in their silver years, isolated in a snowy hinterland, illustrate the inevitability that, in the end, nothing endures but cockroaches and bickering old couples.

The sole disappointment among these secondary figures is played by Melanie Lynskey, who turns in perhaps the first bad performance of her career as Kathleen, a rebel leader fixated on revenge. An underwritten character created for the series, Kathleen serves as a cautionary tale for Joel—grief transformed them both into stronger, sharper, and, in many ways, baser versions of themselves. With Ellie, Joel is offered a path toward redemption, as well as a chance to become more than the sum of his gruff heroics. He's still the dutiful dad who sacrificed neighbors and strangers alike to protect his daughter. The series, like the game, asks when that patriarchal protectiveness—the subject not only of this story but of so many cinematic masculine fantasies—verges on something darker.

But "The Last of Us" does lightness just as well, and it is that willingness to embrace the full humanity of its characters, including their ardor for material comforts, that gives the series its earthy relatability, despite Joel's laughable spryness as a fiftysomething roughneck and Ellie's gothic childhood as an orphan in a post-apocalyptic military school. When Joel and Ellie pack provisions from a rare well-stocked home, she makes sure to prioritize toilet paper—a big improvement from the pages of old magazines. There's a refreshing honesty to the show's approach to menstrual needs, too, not least in the "Fuck yeah!" that Ellie exclaims, stumbling upon an ancient box of Tampax in an abandoned store. The show's occasionally clunky dialogue hampers the formation of an organic through line for Joel and Ellie's relationship, but the scenes of mutual teasing, or of Joel's recollections of what the world was like before, feel as crucial as the ones in which they save each other's life for the umpteenth time. Passing the shattered remains of a downed plane, Ellie marvels at the thought of human flight, an experience that Joel tells her felt far from miraculous. Later, seizing the opportunity to shape her ideas of the past, he reassures her about his own former line of work: "Everybody loved contractors." Acting opposite an understated Pascal, the button-eyed Ramsay shines as the shrewd but sheltered Ellie, a snarky, friendless teen desperate to find a worthy target of her loving mockery.

The expansive imaginings of survivalist adaptations are matched by the production's eerie visual allure, not least in the marine pulchritude of the cordyceps' character design. Multicolored fungi bloom across the faces of the infected, leaving intact the mouths and teeth with which they attack, as they join a teeming, growing army that appears to know no natural death, and only lies dormant, waiting. For all the narrative's graceful swerves and clever surprises, its greatest reveal may be that the characters find reasons to go on despite the immense evolutionary advantages of their predators and the realization of our most savage instincts. ♦

THE NEW YORKER IS A REGISTERED TRADEMARK OF ADVANCE MAGAZINE PUBLISHERS INC. COPYRIGHT ©2023 CONDÉ NAST. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. PRINTED IN THE U.S.A.

VOLUME XCVIII, NO. 46, January 23, 2023. THE NEW YORKER (ISSN 0028792X) is published weekly (except for four planned combined issues, as indicated on the issue's cover, and other combined or extra issues) by Condé Nast, a division of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. PRINCIPAL OFFICE: Condé Nast, 1 World Trade Center, New York, NY 10007. Eric Gillin, chief business officer; Lauren Kamen Macri, vice-president of sales; Rob Novick, vice-president of finance; Fabio B. Bertoni, general counsel. Condé Nast Global: Roger Lynch, chief executive officer; Pamela Drucker Mann, global chief revenue officer and president, U.S. revenue and APAC; Anna Wintour, chief content officer; Jackie Marks, chief financial officer; Elizabeth Minshaw, chief of staff; Sanjay Bhakta, chief product and technology officer. Periodicals postage paid at New York, NY, and at additional mailing offices. Canadian Goods and Services Tax Registration No. 123242885-RT0001.

POSTMASTER: SEND ADDRESS CHANGES TO THE NEW YORKER, P.O. Box 37617, Boone, IA 50037. FOR SUBSCRIPTIONS, ADDRESS CHANGES, ADJUSTMENTS, OR BACK ISSUE INQUIRIES: Write to The New Yorker, P.O. Box 37617, Boone, IA 50037, call (800) 825-2510, or e-mail help@newyorker.com. Give both new and old addresses as printed on most recent label. Subscribers: If the Post Office alerts us that your magazine is undeliverable, we have no further obligation unless we receive a corrected address within one year. If during your subscription term or up to one year after the magazine becomes undeliverable you are dissatisfied with your subscription, you may receive a full refund on all unmailed issues. First copy of new subscription will be mailed within four weeks after receipt of order. Address all editorial, business, and production correspondence to The New Yorker, 1 World Trade Center, New York, NY 10007. For advertising inquiries, e-mail adinquiries@condenast.com. For submission guidelines, visit www.newyorker.com. For cover reprints, call (800) 897-8666, or e-mail covers@cartoonbank.com. For permissions and reprint requests, call (212) 630-5656, or e-mail image_licensing@condenast.com. No part of this periodical may be reproduced without the consent of The New Yorker. The New Yorker's name and logo, and the various titles and headings herein, are trademarks of Advance Magazine Publishers Inc. To subscribe to other Condé Nast magazines, visit www.condenast.com. Occasionally, we make our subscriber list available to carefully screened companies that offer products and services that we believe would interest our readers. If you do not want to receive these offers and/or information, advise us at P.O. Box 37617, Boone, IA 50037, or call (800) 825-2510.

THE NEW YORKER IS NOT RESPONSIBLE FOR THE RETURN OR LOSS OF, OR FOR DAMAGE OR ANY OTHER INJURY TO, UNSOLICITED MANUSCRIPTS, UNSOLICITED ART WORK (INCLUDING, BUT NOT LIMITED TO, DRAWINGS, PHOTOGRAPHS, AND TRANSPARENCIES), OR ANY OTHER UNSOLICITED MATERIALS. THOSE SUBMITTING MANUSCRIPTS, ART WORK, OR OTHER MATERIALS FOR CONSIDERATION SHOULD NOT SEND ORIGINALS, UNLESS SPECIFICALLY REQUESTED TO DO SO BY THE NEW YORKER IN WRITING.

CARTOON CAPTION CONTEST

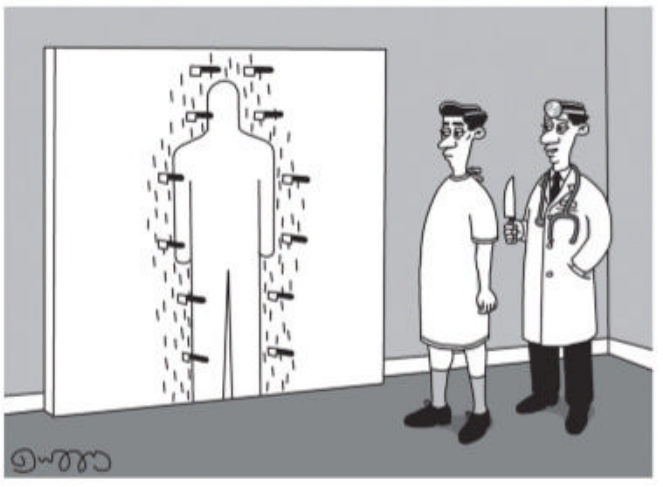
Each week, we provide a cartoon in need of a caption. You, the reader, submit a caption, we choose three finalists, and you vote for your favorite. Caption submissions for this week's cartoon, by Eddie Ward, must be received by Sunday, January 22nd. The finalists in the January 2nd & 9th contest appear below. We will announce the winner, and the finalists in this week's contest, in the February 6th issue. Anyone age thirteen or older can enter or vote. To do so, and to read the complete rules, visit contest.newyorker.com.

THIS WEEK'S CONTEST

"

"

THE FINALISTS



"It's usually noninvasive."
Lisa Blees, North Haven, Conn.

"Of course, you'll be strapped to a spinning wheel during the actual procedure."
Ken Park, San Francisco, Calif.

"We've had trouble finding your vein."
Brandon Lawniczak, Mill Valley, Calif.

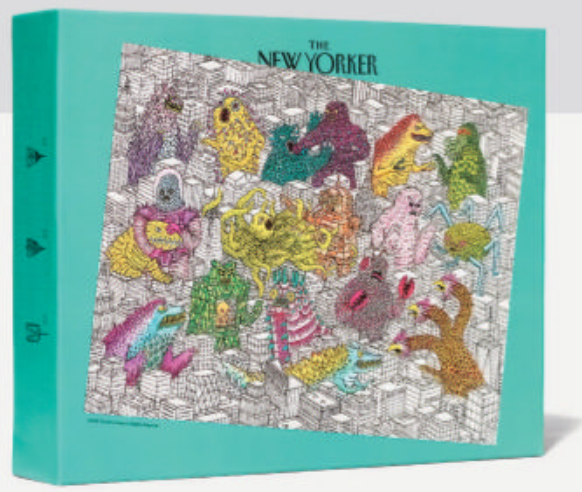
THE WINNING CAPTION

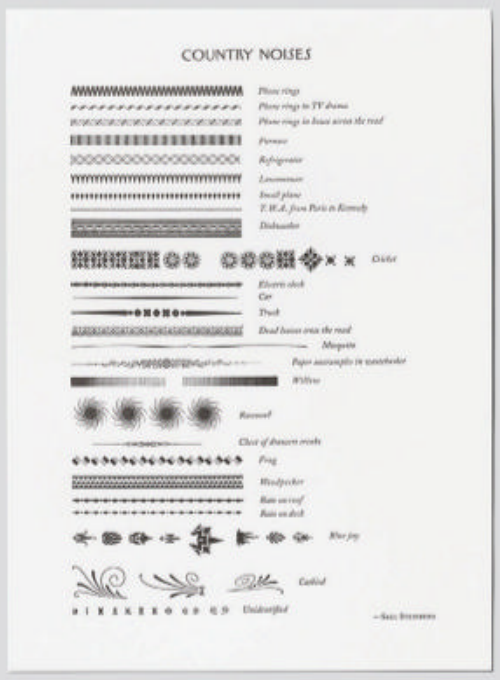
"Any happily married people here tonight?"
Austen Earl, Los Angeles, Calif.

THE NEW YORKER
STORE

Richard McGuire's Full-Tilt Clock

Edward Steed's
"There Goes the Neighborhood" Puzzle





Saul Steinberg's "Country Noises" Print

Good things are in Store.

Check out new offerings, timeless favorites, limited-edition items, and more.

newyorker.com/store

The New Yorker Winter Hat

The Spot-Art Sticker Sheet

Rea Irvin's Classic Long-Sleeve T-Shirt

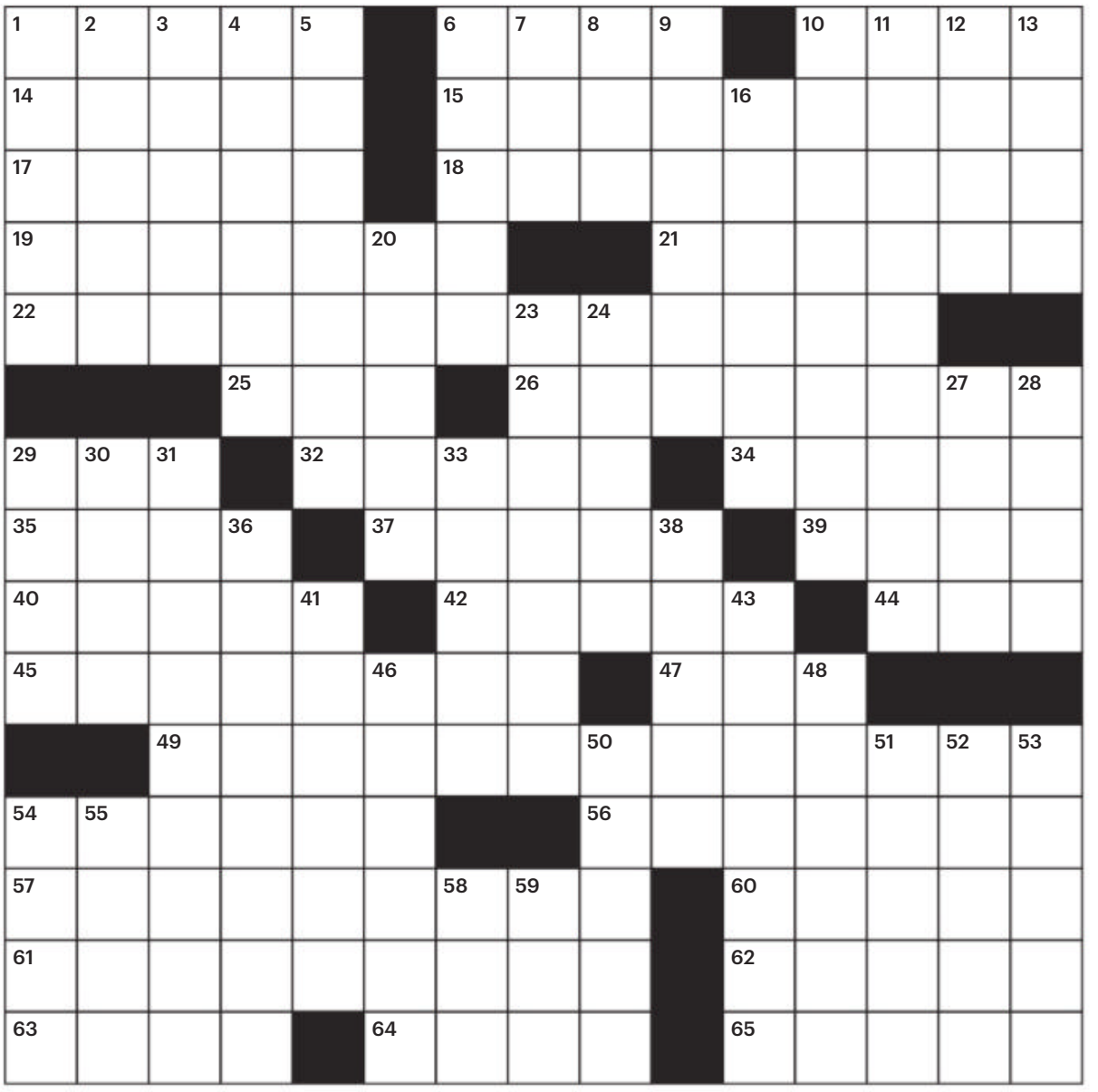
Scan to shop.

PUZZLES & GAMES DEPT.

THE CROSSWORD

A moderately challenging puzzle.

BY WYNA LIU



ACROSS

1 Feature of a necklace
6 "___ Changes" (1970 title track by Buddy Miles)
10 Sharpness, as of prose or flavor
14 Waze way
15 Crunchy green morsel
17 Consciously uncouple, say
18 Curlers' targets
19 Identity under the L.G.B.T.Q.I.A.+ umbrella
21 Without markup
22 Self-proclaimed title for the Hong Kong calligraphy artist turned folk hero Tsang Tsou-choi
25 Martian day
26 The ___ (girl group with the 1958 hit song "Maybe")
29 Angel dust, by another name
32 Unkempt
34 Coloring for lips and cheeks
35 "This can't be good . . ."
37 "Amadeus" choreographer Twyla
39 Itself, in Latin
40 Wax or oil, e.g.
42 Turn inside out
44 Rabbit's foot, e.g.
45 Of the same form, legally
47 "Rosy-fingered" goddess of the dawn
49 Critical awards-season hashtag
54 Inverse trig function
56 Dressed for baking
57 Has feelings for, in *that* way
60 Mountain nymph of Greek mythology
61 They might be picky about porters
62 Brand involved in a seventies soda-for-vodka trade deal with the Soviet Union
63 Secondary social-media profiles, for short
64 Term of identity added to the O.E.D. in 2022
65 First name in cosmetics

DOWN

1 Horror-movie noise
2 Repeated sound in "Silent Night"
3 "Night Mail" poet
4 Smarts
5 Low-level access?
6 Bounce back?
7 Baled material
8 Language suffix
9 Education activist Yousafzai
10 Food whose name means "twice baked"
11 GarageBand, for one
12 Merch-stand staples
13 Toward lower-numbered avenues, in Manhattan
16 Major props?
20 Fourth note of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony
23 Intervals over which tones double in frequency
24 Inquisitive contraction
27 TLC's ___ (Left Eye) Lopes
28 Word with man or plow
29 Hungarian dog breed whose coat resembles a mop
30 What rests on the right hand of "The Thinker"
31 Collapsible mobile-device grip
33 One in a commonly confused trio of homophones
36 Some "Portlandia" portrayals
38 Before surgery
41 They tend to be clingy
43 Line for a water-skier
46 Pointer, or a pointy part of a pointer
48 Spots where land and water meet
50 Full of spunk
51 Prone to bumbling
52 Make big, as hair
53 Comedian Izzard who once described the European Union as "the cutting edge of politics, in a very extraordinarily boring way"
54 Scottish Gaelic name for Scotland
55 Cambodian currency
58 ___-Tiki
59 Wane

Solution to the previous puzzle:

D	A	R	K	■	T	O	P	E	■	■	■	L	C	D
E	V	E	N	T	E	N	O	R	■	■	B	O	A	R
A	E	G	E	A	N	S	E	A	■	L	E	T	M	E
T	R	A	W	L	N	E	T	■	N	O	S	H	E	S
H	S	N	■	K	I	T	■	C	U	S	T	A	R	D
■	■	■	M	I	S	S	T	A	T	E	■	R	O	E
■	■	Z	I	N	C	■	E	B	A	Y	■	I	O	N
■	S	O	N	G	O	F	S	O	L	O	M	O	N	■
M	O	O	■	H	U	R	L	■	L	U	G	S	■	■
R	F	K	■	E	R	E	A	D	E	R	S	■	■	■
I	T	E	R	A	T	E	■	O	R	S	■	L	S	D
S	T	E	E	D	S	■	V	E	G	E	T	A	T	E
C	A	P	E	S	■	B	A	S	I	L	I	C	A	S
A	C	E	D	■	■	A	N	N	E	F	R	A	N	K
N	O	R	■	■	■	M	E	T	S	■	E	N	D	S

Find more puzzles and this week's solution at **newyorker.com/crossword**

Intelligent political conversation. (For once.)

Listen to *The New Yorker's* reimagined politics podcast for a deeper understanding of the issues facing the country —and insight into what comes next.

Hosted by the magazine's writers and editors. Three episodes per week.

Tune in wherever you get your podcasts.

Scan to listen.

NEW YORK CITY BALLET

WINTER 2023

Opens JAN 17

TRAVELERS

GLOBAL SPONSOR

Bloomberg Philanthropies

mastercard

PHOTO BY LEA COLOMBO © 2021